覇剣の皇姫アルティーナ

はけんのこうき アルティーナ

ALTINA
the Sword Princess

II

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覇剣の皇姫
アルティーナ
Ⅱ
ALTINA
the Sword Princess

ジェロームが突きを放った。
その攻撃の鋭さは、
遠目に見ても他の者たちと別格だった。
流れるような動きから槍を突き出す。蛮王が戦斧で受けた。

気まぐれな姫付きメイド
クラリス

読書狂の軍師
レジス

麗しき新入り騎士
エリック

大剣使いの第四皇女
アルティーナ

「オイ……なにか言い出したぞ。貴様の入れ知恵か？」
「僕の案だと〝この辺境に長期の平穏をもたらすため、ヴォルクス要塞を攻略します。作戦はあるから信じて力を貸してください〟って感じだったんですが……」

「要塞を落とさなきゃ、あたしたちは逆賊だわ！　でも、そんな理由で戦争するのは、おかしいと、あたしは思う！」

「あたしは、自分のためじゃなく！　みんなのために戦いたい！　家族のある人は家族を想って！　恋人を！　友人を！　そして、それぞれの隣を見て！　仲間がいるわ！」

Chapter 1: The King of Barbarians

Part 1

Regis became a strategist.

Although he wasn't confident, he had to make it work somehow.

He had quietly told Altina the best course of action.

Having been acknowledged as the commander, she issued the orders to the troops.

"I order Sir Jerome to lead 100 cavalry to intercept the enemy. Find out the number of enemy forces and form a battle front if possible... If the enemy force is too large, you are to withdraw with the safety of our forces as the priority!"

"Orders received!!"

General Jerome who became her subordinate willingly because of the duel led the cavalry out of the fort.

The sound of hooves, clashes of iron and courageous roars came from beyond the stone walls.

Turning their back to the sound of battle, Regis and Altina headed for the central tower.

At the top of the central tower was an observation post overlooking the battlefield, and doubled as a conference room to simulate battle tactics.

First, he needed to treat the wounds Altina sustained during the duel. She had won because of the founding emperor’s sword and some luck, but she was heavily injured and it wouldn't be strange if she needed to be carried in a stretcher.

It must be hard on her, but she still wanted to walk on her own two feet.

The loser Jerome had headed out to battle, so if the winner Altina couldn’t even walk, her objective to display her strength would be in vain.

Blood dripped slowly on the snow by her feet. The young girl who looked like she was going to collapse dragged her feet and forged ahead.

"Hah... hah..."

"Come on, Altina."

Regis beside her couldn’t do anything other than encouraging her on softly.

The distance from the parade square to the central tower seemed so far away.

The tower in the middle of the fortress was a massive building made of stone, the main gate was made from steel.

After much effort, they finally made it past the door.

Regis used his body weight to close the door.

"Ugu~~~"

The steel door closed with a loud bang.

The passageway enclosed by the stone walls became dark, the sound of fighting seemed far away.

After she was out of sight from the soldiers, Altina collapsed.

She leaned on the wall and panted intensely.

"Al, Altina, are you okay?"

"Yeah... Hah... hah... Ugu... I'm fine... I can... still stand..."

The soldiers in the fortress had headed to their battle stations because of the savages' attack, or were preparing to head out in the parade square. They wouldn't see the scene inside the central tower, so it was fine to rest here for a moment.

"Altina, all will be lost if you die. Don't push yourself, have a good rest."

"Ugu, yeah..."

And so she rested her back on the stone wall and caught her breath.

Regis sat beside her too.

And looked at her profile.

Her mother might be a peasant, but she was made a concubine because of her exceptional beauty.

Altina was said to be even more beautiful than her mother.

Her shiny red hair seemed more glamorous after the dangerous battle, her slightly opened eyes and her ruby like pupils seemed more profound.

While she was exhausted, her skin was whiter than snow without a hint of darkness.

Even Regis who wasn't too concerned about a lady's beauty was captivated.

Her innocent profile reminded him that she was just a 14 year old girl. In the Belgarian empire, only those who were 15 would be treated as adults, so Altina was still a child.

But she was strong.

Be it her skills with a sword or her resolve.

She wouldn't give up no matter how dire the situation.

Even though her hands were stained with dirt and blood, Regis thought that she looked beautiful just like this.

Her thin porcelain-like smooth fingers looked as though it might snap with a gentle touch. Those fingers wielded a heavy two-handed sword taller than she was, defeating the hero Jerome renowned for his combat prowess. Her unfathomable arm strength was probably because of her lineage and training.

She was too amazing...

"What is it Regis?"

Altina looked at him.

"Ah, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm feeling much better... rather than that, you are staring at me, what is it?"

"Eh? I, I, I'm staring at you?"

"Yes you are, I can feel my body being pierced by your gaze. Nah, do I look weird? Dirt on my face? Don't hold back and just tell me such matters."

"No, you are fine. Beautiful."

"Hah?"

Regis covered his own mouth.

--What did I say to a child five years my junior!?

I was captivated by you because you are too beautiful - A bard from the imperial capital would probably present this song at this moment. But regrettably, Regis didn’t have such artistic talent.

He could only keep quiet and blush.

Altina looked at him with a face of worry.

"Did you catch a cold because you watched the duel in the blizzard? Your face is all red. Take care and don't catch a cold alright?"

Her right hand reached for Regis.

He shuddered at this and backed away.

His reflex was because of embarrassment.

But she seemed mistaken.

"Ah... Sorry. My hands are dirty right?"

"No, it's not that."

"Ah, don't mind me, I don't like flattery or sympathy. My hands are totally different from the noble ladies right? It's full of sweat during training and the dirt and blood from the duel."

"...I mean it, it's not that."

Regis reached out his hand this time.

Even if his heart was beating wildly, he was still determined to resolve this misunderstanding.

He placed his hand on top of Altina's hand.

"Eh?"

"Your, your, your hands are really pretty, these are hands that carried out your own will... Erm, because I don't have experience with intimate contact with females, so... I'm not used to touching girls, so I was a bit startled."

"Ah... yeah..."

Although he succeeded in making her understand, he missed the chance to retract his hand.

Regis thought about it.

This scene was the same as one in a book he read not long ago. He remembered it was Cuiller Romeros' 'Rawl's love journey'.

- *I took the young lady's hand, letting it caress my face and kissed the sweet flower petals...*

No way!

If the story progressed in that direction, he would be hung for disrespecting royalty, master Cuiller!

Regis was very troubled.

It's a pity, but the main character in any story wouldn't be so useless and let go of a girl's hand without doing anything after praising her beauty. He didn't have anything to refer to.

Just as he was wondering what to do and was petrified,

Cough cough, he heard a coughing sound made forcefully. He turned back and saw a maid in blue uniform - Clarisse smiling at him.

"Do you want to accumulate experience in touching females with the princess? Who can't even walk as your partner in private? Mr. Regis."

"Eh eh!? I wasn't planning on doing that."

"You are unexpectedly devious."

"Am not!"

"What did you plan to do to the princess?"

"Not, not planning to do anything!"

"Is that so? I was wondering if the princess needs treatment."

"That's it! Of course. Eh... The troops will see her in the infirmary so we can't go there. Go back to her room with changing her clothes as an excuse, then summon the doctor over."

Altina nodded in agreement.

Clarisse expressed her understanding.

"I understand. And so, princess."

"Heave ho..."

Altina placed her hands on the wall and pushed herself up.

"Fuu... Finally, strength has returned to my legs."

Her face looked at ease.

Regis straightened his back too.

"Don't push yourself too hard."

"They are beginning the battle out there right? I am acknowledged as the commander after winning the duel, so no one will treat me as a bother."

"... There will be problems if you act too recklessly; Death will certainly come... my death from stomach ulcer."

"Ara, that will be troubling. I worked so hard for you to become my strategist."

"Altina, quickly return to your room and receive the treatment from the doctor properly."

"These words... is it the advice of a strategist? Or a fifth grade admin officer? Or as a friend?"

"It is of course as a strategist. We promised."

"Hmm… Well, I have to listen obediently."

Altina started to walk and Clarisse followed in silence quietly.

She didn't support her, just walking alongside her, but she was in position to help if Altina faltered.

"... Then again, why is Miss Clarisse here?"

The plan was for her to wait at the carriage.

"Because I believe the princess will win the duel and return to her room. But I didn't expect Mr. Regis to be holding her hands so tightly."

"There, there was a complicated reason behind that, just like in the stories... And that is, well..."

This time, Altina was blushing together with Regis too.

Although Clarisse's words were full of impact as usual, her expression was gentle.

"Mr. Regis, please leave the princess to me."

"No, I will accompany you for a while. I have delegated Sir Evrard to be the second wave."

Evrard was the knight commander of Beilschmidt border regiment, a fierce veteran and reliable warrior.

Clarisse seemed to understand and nodded.

"That means you want to watch the princess get undressed while being treated."

"I didn't say that!?"

"I know. You are worried about the princess."

"Of course."

"But I am worried about the princess' purity."

"You are making me out to be a beast no matter what... Hah, I never thought of such a thing before." Regis shrugged.

Clarisse's gaze dropped downwards.

"Is that so? I was wondering if that is fine for a man."

"Huh!?"

Altina looked confused.

Clarisse patted the head of the staggering Altina.

"My princess is so cute~ my princess."

"Eh? What's going on?"

"... Miss Clarisse is the worrying one, she will probably teach Altina some weird things." Regis mumbled to himself.

For the princess without a single friend in the palace, her common knowledge was shockingly lacking.

She would be an adult one year later and be of marriageable age. Regis was a bit worried, but everything he knew came from books anyway.

To be honest, it didn't feel real for Regis to have this conversation. His status was too different from Altina, it was normally impossible for them to chat idly.

She was the princess as well as the commander. Her rank was major general... In comparison, Regis' family had been commoners for generations. He might be a strategist now, but his rank in the army was just a fifth grade admin officer.

Major general, brigadier general, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th grade, their ranks were six tiers apart.

Having permission to address her by her nickname was nothing short of a miracle...

Regis shook his head strongly to remove unnecessary thoughts.

The soldiers outside were engaging the barbarians. His job was to think of the battle plan, even if his confidence was lacking.

"Well, I will go to the observation deck at the highest floor and direct the battle from there."

"I'm leaving it in your hands, Regis."

"I believe in you, Mr. Regis."

Clarisse was smiling with ease.

After parting with them, Regis ran up the stairs.

He was exhausted when he reached the top floor.

He rested his hands on his knees, focusing on sending air into his lungs.

"Fu... fu... fu... fu..."

"Are you okay!?"

A young knight ran over.

About 16 of age, younger than Regis.

His blond hair was tied up at the back, he had blue eyes and a slim face, a handsome man with a refreshing expression.

He was wearing top grade metal armor with a golden longsword at his waist, a character right out of a novel. His voice was as clear as a girl.

"Are you hurt anywhere!?"

"Eh? Ah, no..."

Regis who was confident in his lack of confidence to the extreme, was hesitant in telling the youth younger than him that climbing the stairs were killing him. He still had that meager amount of pride in him.

He shifted his gaze and regulated his breathing.

"Fu... fu... hah.. not... it's nothing."

"I'm glad you are healthy, Sir Regis."

"Eh? Have we met before?"

"My name is Eric Michael de Blanchard."

Eric bowed before him politely.

When Regis heard the last name Blanchard, he recalled a familiar name.

"Could it be... You are Sir Evrard's grandson? I remember you were in Marquis Thénezay's army."

"Yes!"

Regis heard from Evrard that his grandson was in the same unit where Regis used to work as a staff officer.

The Barbarians they were battling attacked the gap in their formation, wiping out Marquis Thénezay's headquarters. Eric was saved because of Regis' command, or at least Eric thought so.

For Regis, he thought the combat officer of the reserves unit deserved the credits.

He took another good look at him.

This must be what they mean by graceful appearance.

The knight commander Evrard was like a gorilla in armor wielding a halberd, a giant bald man with a short beard. Regis thought he was still in his prime, but was shocked by how old his grandson was.

But most surprising was the lack of any semblance between the two.

Eric's face was blushing from agitation.

"The steady figure, calm attitude and precise command of Sir Regis back then... I was convinced you are the man I should bet my life on and devote my service to."

His tone was strong, but not crude.

His refreshing smile was elegant like a shining fountain.

Holding Regis who almost died just climbing stairs with such high regards, Regis felt sorry about it.

"... I heard you volunteered to come here?"

"Yes! I just reached here last night. I wanted to greet you, but you seemed to be busy."

"Not many people would want to come to the front lines here. This is a dangerous place."

"That's why I am here. I was saved by Sir Regis, this time I will become Sir Regis's shield."

"... I am very grateful... But I am not worthy."

"Didn't you assume the post of strategist? I saw the duel and your declaration just now."

"Ugh."

He had to say that in that situation. It wasn't a lie, but to Regis who wasn't used to being the center of attention, he wanted to curl up into a ball.

"... Would I be able to serve well in the role of a strategist...? And the commander of the border regiment is the fourth princess Marie Quatre. A knight should swear fealty towards a princess right?"

Although Regis was granted permission to address Altina by her nickname, he still avoided doing so in the presence of others to prevent bad rumors from arising.

"Of course, as a knight of the Bulgarian empire, my sword would be wielded in the service of the royalty and nobles. But the bonfire of hope you ignited in the despair of the dark would never be forgotten."

That's a line straight from the theatres. Regis read about operas so he didn't dislike it, but the compliments from others made him uneasy.

"Bon, bonfire... If you mean a lamp, I was carrying one back then..."

He averted his eyes unconsciously.

Eric's excitement didn't cool down as he said with a smile.

"I had brought the princess' sword with me by my grandfather's orders."

Regis finally caught his breath and looked towards the conference room.

A piece of cloth was laid over the table and Altina's Grand Tonnerre Quatre was placed on it. She couldn't bring it along with her physical condition after the duel, so they had to send someone to deliver it here.

The mud and snow had been cleaned off, leaving it in its original glory. It did not even have a scratch after it went through such a fierce battle.

The window partitions leading to the observation deck were wide open, guarded by two knights.

They saluted when their gaze met Regis'.

Regis went through the windows and reached a position where he could watch the battle. The snow was slowly piling up.

The wind blew towards his face.

This was the second time he came to the observation deck of this conference room. The previous time was the following morning after first arriving at Sierck fortress and Altina showed him around.

The scenery before him was spectacular then, but the view was obscured by snow this time and he can't see far into the distance. This wasn't the time to enjoy the sights anyway.

The battle was progressing before his eyes.

Sierck fort was constructed on the grounds slopping towards the north. A large group of soldiers were gathered in the parade square, waiting for the signal to deploy. Setting the forces on defense duties aside, the stand by units numbered 2000.

300 cavalries were sent out

They faced 600 savages.

The situation had evolved from the initial clash to glaring at each other from a distance.

If they engaged in melee combat, they will fight until one side retreats. But with proper command and control, it was possible to pull some distance away for a chance to rest before unnecessary casualty were caused by fatigue.

Jerome and Evrard's cavalries adopt a formation defending the fort. The barbarians set their eyes on their prey, waiting for a chance from afar like beasts.

On the snowy white plains ravaged by footsteps, several people laid down with no signs of movement. Although the savages had greater losses, the empire's cavalries also had casualties.

Eric came to Regis' side.

"What a great number for the barbarians to muster."

"Yes. The barbarians in this region seemed exceptionally strong... And there should probably be more."

"Why did you think so?"

"Look at how the savages were behaving, they are glancing to their back every now and then. If the rear guards were doing that, they might just be worried about their retreat route being cut off. But the ones in front are doing the same, so it should be right to say they are waiting for reinforcement."

"I get it now. But why attack in waves? Is it to buy time to transport artillery?"

"Barbarians don't have artillery. The plan was probably for the 600 vanguard to infiltrate the fortress under the cover of the blizzard and open the gates for reinforcement."

"The savages can use such tactics!?"

"Well, they can do at least this much to take a fort... But they should be retreating after that plan failed. Could they have some reason compelling them to seize the fort?"

The stalemate didn't last long.

The barbarians charged with a roar.

The battle started anew.

Bracing their lances, the cavalries prepared to engage. This should be their victory in normal cases. It was not surprising for 300 cavalries to rout 600 savages with ease.

But there were many strong warriors amongst the barbarians, making them a match for the cavalries.

Leading all the barbarians was a man in flamboyant attire wielding a giant war axe. Both his appearance and his power were prominent.

The cavalries facing him attack with their lances.

The lances were then broken by the war axe.

The man then leap deftly like a monkey, going higher than the horse's back and slashed his war axe with one hand.

The knight bled profusely from his head.

And fell limply from the horse.

There were few savages that can defeat knights one on one. Not the knights with empty titles living lavishly in the imperial capital, but the ones in the front lines. It was unusual for them to fall so easily.

Regis who was watching sighed.

"That is the... Barbarian King?"

"Who do you mean?"

Eric besides him asked.

"According to the scouting reports, there was a powerful figure that united at least 3 barbarian tribes."

"I see, so that's their king?"

"I don't know about their hierarchy make up, but calling the biggest fish in the pond as the king should be common."

"And thus, the Barbarian King."

Eric nodded in enlightenment.

His voice was calm with no hint of a smile. Now wasn't the time to chat happily.

They lost 2 more riders.

Jerome charged over on his jet black horse. He wasn't in armor as he was dueling in uniform and moved out in this attire.

He wasn't holding the thin spear used in the duel, but a silver lance.

Regis pointed at Jerome.

"That is Sir Jerome's lance 'Le Cheveu D'une Dame' (Dame's hair). It is famous as the weapon of heroes. 4.2Pa (311cm) long, the tip is made from fairy silver."

"Fairy silver was said to be a gift from the fairies to the 'Flame Emperor'.

"There was a legend like that... The current theory says it is some form of natural alloy."

Smelting several types of metals and mixing them to form material better than iron, this was common knowledge in this era.

Jerome thrust with his lance. The attack was so sharp even the bystanders could tell from afar that it was better than the other knights. The lance shot forward in an instant.

The Barbarian King blocked it with his war axe and tried to close the gap in order to counter attack.

Seeing through his opponent's intention, Jerome thrust his lance at his enemy.

When the lance was about to hit, the barbarian king twisted his upper body to dodge. Not giving the barbarian king time to recover, Jerome aimed for his heart and pressed the attack. It was parried by the war axe again.

Jerome's enemy retreated.

They were about equal in abilities, but his weapon and being on a horse gave Jerome the edge-- Regis analyzed the battle before him.

Eric leaned forward.

"It's grandfather!"

Evrard was dispersing the savages with his giant halberd.

"Hmmm, as expected of the knight captain."

"I want to fight too! Sir Regis, allow me to reinforce them! We should send out the 3rd wave if the enemy has reinforcements right?"

That was the normal course of command. No matter how the process goes, all the forces will be deployed from the front.

"The enemy will run if we send in more troops at this point."

"Isn't expelling them the objective?"

"You are correct, but they will definitely try again... If possible, I want this battle to affect all future engagement as well."

"Future engagements? What do you mean?"

"Eh... Pen and paper...?"

"At once!"

Eric ran to the conference room and brought paper, pen and ink over.

Regis thought about using the table, but he remembered the 'Thundering Quartet' placed on it.

It will be a huge mistake that would be chronicled in the history book if he drip ink on the sword.

And Regis felt he might do just that with how preoccupied he was.

"... Sorry, could you hold the ink for me?"

"Okay!"

Eric took the place of a desk.

He started to write hurriedly.

"Erm—Will this do? This should be easy to understand..."

He signed off and rolled the paper up. The ink wasn't dry yet, but it's fine if it’s legible.

He handed it to Erica.

"Please deliver this to Sir Jerome, Sir Evrard and the commander in the parade square."

"Understood! This is the very first orders of the strategist!"

"Hmm? Ah... That is true..."

"Since its Sir Regis, there must be brilliant instructions written on it."

"Hahaha... That is impossible. It's still manageable when a unit was around 300 men, but for the border regiment with 3000 soldiers, skilful command is just a theory on paper."

"Is that so?"

"That's how it is if you don't prepare the orders. Commanding in this era is like predicting 5 steps ahead in chess and giving instructions." Eric looked at the paper in his hand.

"You mean... You had written the next 5 steps in this?"

"Well, you can say that."

"That is like a prophecy."

"I can't divine the future, and I heard it's not anything good either... I just coincidentally read similar battle records and happened to know about this."

"I will deliver this message even if it cost me my life!"

"No no. It's okay to lose it, I can just write another one. Just don't get hurt."

"Yes, alright... I understand."

Practically speaking, writing the same thing won't work as the battle progresses, but Regis was afraid Eric might be too young and rash.

As Eric was leaving, he said to the knights on standby:

"You guys too. There is nothing else for you, so I leave escorting Eric to you."

They looked at each other in surprise, then salute to express their comprehension. The 3 knights left the conference room.

"Ara ara..."

Regis supported his face with his hand while leaning on the railing of the observation deck.

Should he have told Eric the future of the empire was depending on the safe delivery of the message?

That would definitely improve his morale...

"Hmmm, usually, young soldiers in such positions are reckless with their lives~~"

The man on man fight between Jerome and the barbarian king was intense.

It was clear even on the observation deck that Jerome's attack was filled with blood thirst.

That doesn't mean he was going easy on Altina back then, but he was definitely fighting without intending to kill the princess.

The barbarian king was good too, fending off the consecutive attack with his war axe while looking for an opening to break the lance and counter attack.

If the lance wasn't made from fairy silver, it probably would break.

In the end the war axe cracked in a clash, forcing the barbarian king back.

Jerome wanted to press the attack, but Eric made it just in time.

The orders were relayed--

Jerome was far away from Regis, but he still glared at him.

The distance from the observation deck to the battlefield was vast and you shouldn't be able to see the expression. But Jerome somehow conveyed his anger.

It couldn't be helped since this was a battle.

But if the distance wasn't this far, that gaze might have stopped Regis' heart.

What would he had said if they were within speaking distance?

A short moment later--

Jerome's 100 cavalry and Evrard's 200 riders cleared to either side, leaving a route to the fortress.
He wasn't happy, but Jerome carried out his orders.

At the same time, the main gate opened.

The giant metal gate opened outwards.

At this time, the sound of footsteps rushing to the conference room could be heard.

Regis turned and looked.

"Hmmm?"

"Ah, it's here!"

Altina barged in, her left wrist in a sling. She wore a new dress, wearing all her armor except the ones on her chest and left arm.

Behind her was the maid Clarisse and --

A woman in white.

That lady looked displeased.

"Princess, didn't I told you to rest quietly?"

Wearing spectacles that were expensive in this era and with her hair cut to the same length, she gave off the impression of a man.

Her identity was the imperial doctor, 29 years of age.

Regis didn't get her name. Female doctors were rare in the empire, and Sierck fortress only had one doctor, so everyone addressed her as the lady doctor.

Just like Clarisse, she seemed to have followed the princess since her time in the palace.

Altina looked much better.

Regis smiled with relief.

"Hi. Are you fine now?"

"Yeah!"

"You are not fine!" The lady doctor squinted her eyes behind her glasses and roared.

Altina shook her right hand.

"I am really fine! I can walk normally now. Lady doctor is overprotective."

"You have a fracture!"

"I know but..."

"Eh!? Fracture!?"

Regis asked in shock, the lady doctor nodded in irritation.

"Really, you are the princess. Full recovery will be in 3 months. Princess, please don't increase my workload."

"Wouldn't it be boring if you don't practice your medical skills?"

Altina refused to compromise.

Clarisse sighed.

"Wild animals were said to continue hunting even if they suffer a fracture. That's how it is, nothing we can do about it."

Regis and the lady doctor sighed deeply.

"Hah~~... Our princess is just like the grey wolves."

"Ara ara..."

"What? It can't be helped since it was a duel! That aside, how goes the battle, Regis!? Have we won!?"

Altina stood besides Regis and watch the situation from the observation deck.

Her expression changed.

"Huh!? What is happening!? Won't the enemy march right in!"

"Well... Jerome and Evrard split to either side and the main door is left open. We will intimidate them with the possibility of attack from 3 sides."

"In such a situation, they should be guarding the front of the fortress, and split to either side after the reinforcements are deployed!? If you open the main gate before them, wouldn't the enemy charge in!?"

Altina analyzed the situation deftly.

Regis was impressed.

"Impressive. You have memorized the basics of tactics!"

"It is obvious there is a catastrophic failure here! The enemy will enter via the main gate... Ah, they are coming in one after another!?"

The savages were charging into the parade square in front of the central tower.

They were engaging the empire troops who had mustered for reinforcement.

The lady doctor's face turned pale.

"Hey, Mr. strategist, is it really okay!?"

"... For the time being."

Altina stared at him.

"I believe in Regis. So, please explain to me clearly."

"Explanation, how should I... If you are the barbarians -- if the defending troops suddenly retreats, and the main gate were wide open, what would you think?"

"Great chance!" Altina answered immediately.

The lady doctor replied "Could this be a trap?"

Clarisse said "I don't know."

Regis continued to explain.

"Well, that's the few possible opinions. People who attacks thinking it's a chance, some who are wary about the possibility of a trap and others who don't understand and can't take any action... They will definitely split in their opinions. It's a tough question, a real battle is different from chess, the actions might be unorthodox... The soldiers are battling under the delicate psychological balance of fear and glory."

"Won't they attack en masse and then play by ear?"

"If they knew this was happening, it might be possible to maintain command. But the barbarians don’t have a clear chain of command, so they will be slow to attack if they spot an unexpectedly good opportunity."

The lady doctor tilted her head.

"Why would they attack together even though it's possible this is a trap? I won't go if it was up to me, I will decide my things on my own."

"Because the empire's cavalry are watching from the sides. They have to follow if their comrades charge, they will be attacked on both sides by the cavalries if they stay."

"Ah... I see... So they have to go along."

"Yeah. But the riders will be faster in climbing up the snowy slope, so Sir Jerome and Sir Evrard's riders will return to the main gate faster than them."

It was as Regis said.

Only 200 of the 600 savages made it into the fort. The slow advance of the enemy was cut off by the cavalries from the side.

The horsemen turned into a double wall in front of the main gate.

Altina claped her hands.

"I see, divide and conquer!"

"... That's part of it."

"There's another reason?"

"Splitting them is just a means... A way to surround the strongest chess piece of the enemy... The barbarian king is very strong, even Sir Jerome finds it hard to subdue him... Judging from his personality, he seemed to prefer standing on the forefront of the battle."

Reckless, like a certain princess.

Right right, Altina nodded in agreement.

"That's how a commander should act."

"In my last unit, the headquarters were usually situated in the rear... Anyway, we should make use of this. He should charge in straight if he spots any weakness."

Clarisse asked:

"Mr. Regis, is everything going well?"

"We can probably win."

"What are you worrying about then?"

"Eh? Is that the expression on my face? Oh no..."

"That's how it looks to me."

Altina and the lady doctor stared at him after listening to Clarisse. Regis scratched his head.

"... On the whole, things are progressing as I expects, but there is one worrying factor. If the savages refuse to surrender, the strategy would be a failure."

Eric had relayed the orders to the soldiers in the parade square.

The soldiers equipped with giant shields to defend against arrows formed a wall inside the main gates, behind them were pike men ready to attack.

After setting the improvised trap, the gates opened and the barbarians swarmed in shortly after.

"Warghhh--!!"

The barbarians roared like beasts and charged.

The thick wood and leather shields were being ripped apart.

And the pikes thrust out.

"Hya--!!"

The chests of the savages were pierce, spraying out blood.

The battle would be a failure if they broke through the encirclement. With a large number of noncombatants supporting the soldiers in the fortress, there would be many casualties.

The empire's soldier in the parade square numbered 1000-- the barbarians were 200 strong.

They could subdue them under normal conditions.

A man suddenly flew out from the besieged barbarians.

Regis who was watching from the observation deck pointed at him.

"That's the Barbarian King.

"Is he strong!?"

Altina leaned out to look.

One of the savages probably noticed Regis watching them.

An arrow was shot.

Regis didn't even have time to notice.

The iron tipped arrow flew through the air.

Even though he might have avoided the Barbarian King's attention, he didn't have the skill to fend off the arrow.

The tip was right before his eyes.

"Eh...?"

Altina pounced on Regis suddenly.

A metallic thud echoed out.

Altina used her right wrist armor to deflect the incoming arrow-- Regis finally noticed after he saw the arrow falling off.

"Ugu, wah!?"

"What is it!? Are you hurt!?"

"Are are are you alright Altina!? What about your wound?"

"Me? I simply blocked with my armor. It's impossible for arrows fired from a bow to pierce metal armor, right?"

"I am not asking about that."

Anyway, she seemed to be fine.

The barbarian king leaped up high, over the heads of the people around him. Using the shoulders of his underlings, he jumped again.

Over the top of the empire soldiers bracing with pikes and shields.

"Hyaaa---!!"

Using a new giant war axe, he smashed the heads of the soldiers.

The soldier besides him swung his sword in a frenzy. The barbarian king dodged and sent the man's arm flying with his war axe.

Screams erupted.

His strength made the surrounding people fell into chaos.

How widespread was the damage... Maybe the encirclement had already collapsed.

Years ago, in a battle with Germania, black knight Jerome broke through the enemy heavy cavalry from the front, becoming the hero that turned the tide of war.

Maybe the barbarian king would achieve similar accomplishment and become a new legend.

... If the strategist was inept.

While Regis was being intimidated by the flying arrow, his plan was underway.

When someone leaped up, they would notice one section of the encirclement was weaker than the rest.

And the Barbarian King charged there naturally.

He had to go.

He was forced into such a situation. If he didn’t break out if the siege, the members of his tribe stuck inside the fort will be decimated.

Using his tribesmen as a platform, the Barbarian King jumped again.

The empire soldiers who weren't armed with swords or pikes lied in wait ahead and threw something out.

"Hyaa!!"

The troops shouted in unison.

It was a rope anchored by 3 lead weight. Mainly used for hunting, it was a throwing weapon known as Bolas.

Unlike arrows, it was a wide area weapon, able to hit fast moving critters easily. But it was seldom used in warfare...

Several of it was thrown out at the same time.

The barbarian king wielded his war axe, deflecting 3 of it.

"Shyaaaa!!"

But one of it entangled his arm. When he flicked it off, another got his legs.

The lead weight hit his stomach and the king fell down with one arm propping himself up.

"Uguu!?"

When he lifted his head, several halberds were in front of him.

A captain ranked knight roared fiercely "Don't move! You monkey!" as he raised his sword.

"Don't kill him!"

A loud sound that overwhelmed the fighting noises in the parade square was uttered clearly.

It was Altina.

Regis' ears were ringing because he was standing next to her.

By her command, the knight stilled his blade, sparing the Barbarian King's life.

Regis cupped his ears.

"... What is it all of a sudden?"

"I want to speak with that person."

"Eh? What?"

He didn't catch that because his ears were ringing... Not really, Regis was just surprise by what she said.

For the citizens of Belgaria, barbarians were an existence similar to dangerous beasts.

It was like trying to talk to a man eating wolf, so others would look at her with confusion.

It was a common assumption that you couldn't communicate with savages.

Although Regis thought differently... But he was surprised when someone like Altina said something like that.

"Isn't it a pity for a powerful warrior to die like this?"

"... I do not understand how that is a pity. But I agree to a dialogue. In fact, I think it is necessary for you right now."

"I don't really get you, but it seemed that you do approve of this."

Altina took a deep breath.

Regis took a step back and cupped her ears. Clarisse and the lady doctor did the same.

Altina shouted once again.

"I, the 4th princess Marie Quatre Argentina De Belgaria! Wish to speak with the king of barbarians! Both sides, cease battle immediately!"

She just shouted out her true feelings.

But the soldiers thought of it as a declaration of victory. It was an announcement of the barbarian king's capture.

And adding in the excitement of the battle, it naturally evolved into this.

The soldiers raised their sword or pikes, cheering victoriously.

"Woahhhh--!!""

"Vive l'Empire!!"

"Long live Marie Quatre!! Vive l'Empereur!!"

With the battle decided conclusively, the cheers completely demoralized the savages.

After climbing up the steep slope in a blizzard, battling the tough cavalries and besieged after charging into the fort, the accumulated fatigue was a major contributing factor...

Most of the barbarians let go of their weapon and knelt.

Part 2

The savages were gathered in a corner of the fort with their backs to the wall, guarded by soldiers with pikes and bows at least 10 paces away.

The blizzard was over, but it was still winter in the northern region.

If this was not resolved overnight, there might be people freezing to death.

Altina and the Barbarian King's dialogue must conclude before dawn-- Regis thought.

The cheers should be audible outside the fort too... Nearly 400 of the savages didn't surrender and they congregated in a bunch a short distance away from the fortress.

It was easy for the cavalry to press the attack, but that was prohibited. Instead, they were tasked with informing the savages about the dialogue between the barbarian representative and the empire's commander.

That was Regis' recollection of the events so far.

He was worried about a massacre happening.

If the savages didn't surrender, the empire's army that had them surrounded might kill them off. It's nothing special, but Regis wanted to avoid that for both strategical and emotional reasons.

It was great that losses on both sides were kept to a minimum, Regis breathed in relief.

Just as Regis thought, the reinforcement of the barbarians appeared shortly after.

They joined the group outside the fort, considering their options as they looked over here-- but they remained in place without attacking or retreating.

They seemed to be waiting for the dialogue to end.

Year of the empire 850, the last battle of Sierck fortress came to an end in a tense atmosphere.

"Hey Regis!"

Jerome returned to the central tower with the attitude of the cavalry charge.

"Ah, yes..."

Regis was logging the battle reports on the table in the conference room. It should have been done by appointed personnel, but with all the admin officers chased off by Jerome, there was no one else to fill in the post.

Altina returned to her room to change into a dress for the dialogue with the barbarian king. She couldn't attend the dialogue with her left hand in a sling.

Jerome leaned in close.

"What the hell was that battle plan!?"

"... That... Considering the blizzard, it will be hard to chase them down if they were to scatter..."

"So you let them into the fort!? You allow the savages to enter! We will be the laughingstock of the neighboring nations!?"

"Its fine, having a 14 year old princess as the commander is enough for them to make fun of us."

"That's worse!"

Regis calmed him down with soothing words.

"That's good, let them underestimate us. It's an effective strategy for both defense and offence for the enemy to misjudge our strength."

"I get it. This is indeed a strategy someone like you who likes useless schemes will come up with. But you missed out one thing."

"What is it?"

"I, hate people looking down on me!"

"... Is, is that so?"

Regis scratched his head, he didn't factor that in.

Regis thought Jerome was angry about the usage of the fort as a trap, but turned out it was a matter of pride.

As expected, reality wouldn't progress like the books.

Rather than feeling uneasy about his talent as a strategist, Regis was just feeling uneasy in general.

"Speaking of which, we seemed to have captured savages. Why aren't they dead?"

"The princess wished to have a dialogue with them."

"Dialogue? Is the princess stupid? Barbarians should just be hung or enslaved."

He wasn't finding fault or bad mouthing her, Jerome was really puzzled by the princess' state of mind.

Regis didn't think the barbarians were wild beast... But he understood that such views belonged in the minority.

This was also a gamble in order to reach the goal that was too far away.

It would be great if the dialogue with the barbarians proceeded well.

On the flip side, the princess would gain the reputation of being naive and lack common sense if the dialogue was to break down.

Because the end point of the target was too difficult to reach, they would always face gambles with the odds against them.

"... It's not too late to doubt the princess' intelligence after the dialogue with the barbarian king ends.

It's about time."

Regis got up from his chair.

Jerome headed for the exit too.

"I have opened the warehouse. Meat and alcohol will be needed."

"... Ah, I understand."

Regis was wondering what to use as the reward for victory, but it seemed that having a feast was the style of this regiment.

That was the case too when they nabbed the bandits some time ago.

In his old unit, those who achieved merit could obtain jewels or art pieces as rewards. Would the troops here be fine without such treasures? Regis was worried about that all this time.

"Thank you for your guidance."

"This is not for you or the princess. It is the duty of the generals to reward his charges."

"I will keep that in mind."

"Hmmp... Don't act humble all of a sudden. Are you mocking me?"

"Your request is hard for me to grasp."

"Just speak your mind. Others couldn't trust you because of the way you act."

"Speak my mind?"

"Yes, just say it without hiding anything."

"... I want a holiday. I want to read books."

"Why the hell would I care!"

"How mean."

Regis' shoulders drooped.

The central courtyard used for training had been turned into a temporary audience room.

Altina was seated in a chair in the middle.

To hide her left arm, a large mantle covered her left shoulder and her knees.

Regis stood to her right while Jerome stand by to her left.

There wasn't any red carpet, but the soldiers lined up in a row, with the empire's flag hanging from the tip of their spear's.

Originating from the founding emperor's nickname of 'L'Empereur Flamme', the flag was red and decorated with 7 swords.

Historically, the first emperor fought under the banner of a pure white flag. But in recent times, all the nations treated the white flag as a sign of surrender or ceasefire.

Between the 2 rows of soldiers, the barbarian king was brought in.

His arms were tied to his waist, with Evrard holding the other end of the rope. Eric was standing behind him.

Evrard stopped 10 paces away from Altina.

Altina glanced over at him.

"It's fine, bring him closer. It's a pain to talk so far away."

"But..."

"And release the ropes. I want a dialogue, not a prisoner inspection.

"Princess!? This man moves as fast as a monkey, it's too dangerous!"

It's normal for Evrard to object.

But Altina didn't care.

"You mean I can't beat a bare handed man? And the general revered as a hero is beside me anyway. Wouldn't they mock me as a coward?"

"Ugh... Well... I understand."

Evrard was worried because Altina was injured, and also the feelings of the troops.

Sometimes, the dignity of being in a high position was more important than personal safety.

The ropes were removed and the barbarian king moved within 5 paces away.

Regis' mouth was dry from the tension.

Similar to Jerome, the Barbarian King looked like he was in his late twenties, wearing clothes made from animal skin and bird feathers.

All the savages depicted in the empire's drawings showed them as demons defeated by knights, or looking like monkeys or bears. But the Barbarian King had a noble air about him.

He arrogantly looked down at the princess, refusing to kneel.

There were chairs that elevate you higher when you sat down, but it couldn't be moved to this temporary audience hall.

Evrard frowned.

"I will introduce myself again... I am Marie Quatre Argentina De Belgaria, princess that is 4th in line to the throne."

The king didn't say a word.

Was it impossible to communicate with words? The soldiers became doubtful.

Regis thought the king looked like he was deep in thought. Regis believed that to be true.

The barbarian king spoke:

"What a long name."

He spoke in the language of Germania, the neighboring nation.

He probably hailed from Germania. And he was educated enough to understand the Bulgarian language.

Even with the eruption of war, interaction between the empire and the surrounding nations remained frequent.

It was thus proper manners for royalty and aristocrats to learn the language of neighboring countries.

Although Regis was a commoner, he learned Germanian too during his education in the military academy.

This means apart from the rank and file troops hoisting the flag, everyone present knew Germanian.

Evrard accused him:

"How insolent of you! This is the princess!"

"Etiquette? Belgarians like meaningless things."

Altina stopped the red face Evrard by raising her hand.

"It's okay, he is not a citizen of the empire. It is strange to ask people who were neither subordinates nor citizens to show their respect."

The loyal knight commander understood what the princess meant and shut his mouth,

Altina asked the barbarian in Germanian:

"How should I address you? It is proper manners to introduce yourself after being told someone else's name. Or do the barbarians have no names as the rumor says?"

"We don't see ourselves as barbarians. My name is Diethart, I had left my birthplace behind. And our nation is called Bargainheim."

Jerome smiled sarcastically.

He leaned back exaggeratedly, as if he was scared. He raised his voice for all the troops to hear.

"Hah... What a grand discovery. I didn't know the savages can joke. That dark forest is actually a country! Belgaria's neighboring country was not the Germania trash, but the barbarian nation!"

All the soldiers laughed heartily.

Diethart grind his teeth as he was being mocked.

But the one erupting in anger was-- Altina.

Her right fist smashed on her arm rest, shattering the elegant wooden chair into pieces.

"Ah..."

The place turned silent.

After coughing dryly:

"It seemed like I have to teach you how to receive guests. That's enough, all of you leave."

"Princess!?"

Evrard protest strongly, but Altina wasn't taking back her words.

She straightened the half destroyed chair with a kick.

"Everyone retreat by 30 paces! This is an order!

Jerome rubbed the scar on his jaw.

"Fufufu... Will that be fine? You might get strangled by the barbarian right?"

"I will be depending on you if that happened."

"What if you were taken hostage?"

"Ara, so you do worry about me."

"Forget it. Chat with that Germania idiot however much you want."

Jerome walked towards the wall.

Regis was planning to leave, but Altina grabbed him by the collar.

"Where are you going?"

Regis thought, *didn't you order everyone to leave*-- other people were present so he answered formally:

"By the princess' command..."

"You are the strategist, this is the time for you to work. Any objections?"

"... I am a bit thirsty."

"Ah, I forgot about that."

Regis and Altina stayed behind while Jerome and the troops retreated by 30 steps all the way to the wall. Evrard and Eric kept their distance too.

A short while later, 2 new chairs, a tables as well as red wine was sent over.

Diethart took a seat first.

Altina sat opposite him while Regis stood to one side.

"Doesn't this feel great? It is just like a cafe terrasse."

"... Yes. In the courtyard with piling snow, a cafe terrasse surrounded by menacing soldiers. This will definitely be popular in the empire. Although I haven't seen one before."

"It might attract a huge crowd."

Altina seemed to be in a good mood and smiled.

Diethart doesn't look too friendly.

"Belgarians seem to prefer drinking coffee by the side of a road. How queer."

"The northern nations are cold, so it's understandable. Belgaria has a warm climate and the wind feels nice. That might be so, but I have never visited an open air cafe by the streets before... Just once, I want to try drinking coffee in a nice shop."

If Altina visited a cafe terrasse, it would attract a large crowd of spectators. Drinking coffee leisurely was impossible.

There should be a balcony in the palace-- Regis swallowed these words. The coffee in a place filled with the jealousy and mockery wouldn't taste nice no matter what.

Time for the main topic.

"Princess, there isn't much time left before the sun sets."

"We have questions for you, Diethart. Are you the king of Bargainheim?

"Nein. We formed a nation but we have no kings. I just happened to be one of the founders, so everyone follows my lead."

"Isn't that a king?"

"I won't take money or food from my fellow citizens."

"Oh, so there is no taxation."

Diethart nodded.

Altina thought it was something fresh and interesting.

"Isn't that great Regis? A country without taxes! The citizens must be so happy!"

"... If the citizens don't think it is unfair."

"Wouldn't everyone be equal if there were no taxes?"

"For example... The fields need to be guarded. Who will decide the order of the watch?"

"Hmm? Wouldn't a representative like Diethart do that?"

"I see. Then the king is Mr. Diethart and the taxes will be in the form of labor as the watchmen. When 2 or more people live together, there will be people who make decisions and people who provide services. No matter what their names may be, they are still the kings and tax collectors.

"Ah, that's how it is."

"No taxation means no country. An organization can't be formed with ideals alone... Although the citizens will still be supportive while the country was still winning battles..."

Regis stopped here.

Diethart glared at him.

"Bargainheim might indeed be a small nation and it is a fact we could not reach our ideals in many areas. But the empire is wrong. We have many people who came to us to escape the tyranny of the empire."

Regis didn't argue and waited for Altina to speak.

This was the dialogue she was hoping for, he could only assist her from the side.

If she wanted to take the path of greatness, negotiations such as this were unavoidable. Considering Regis' position, it was possible for the other party to refuse dialogue with him.

Altina needed to take the lead in the dialogue.

"I think the empire is wrong too."

He should have answered instead -- Regis regretted his decision and his stomach started to hurt.

Her words probably didn't reach Jerome and the troops standing by the wall in the courtyard. Even so, this wasn't something you should confess plainly to the barbarians.

Diethart was baffled.

"What are you saying? You are not making sense."

"There is no reason why a royalty can't be against the empire right?"

"They shouldn't be able to, that is their position."

A barbarian lecturing a royal princess on what her mindset should be, how troubling.

But Diethart was very well educated.

He was explaining the theory correctly.

Altina shook her head.

"I want to live for my beliefs, and not let others set my position for me."

"So you are going against the empire."

"You want to save the citizens that are treated unjustly?"

"You are wrong. When large armies clash and lead to civil war, the ones who suffer are the citizens."

Regis thought about this too.

But the answer was clear when he read the chronicles of history.

Altina understood as well.

"If the citizens want to be saved, they should be the ones working hard for it, right? If they are not willing, they can ignore me and continue to conform to the system. Because I am not God, it is impossible for me to erase all the sufferings without letting anyone know. Only the citizens can save themselves."

"But what would be the meaning of your existence then?"

Altina looked towards Regis.

Regis thought Altina was asking for his opinion. But that wasn't so.

She continued immediately.

"I just need a chance... That's all."

"Incomprehensible. Belgarians incomprehensible beautify their sins. Words need to be logical and precise."

Yeah~~ this means... My criticism of the tyranny can push the citizens to take action and save themselves. That is the meaning of my existence. Right?"

"That's too irresponsible. Seeking happiness for your followers are the duties of those with a high status."

Altina tilted her head.

"Regis, do I have that obligation? Am I irresponsible?"

"... Taking action in order to change the empire's system and uniting them and meeting their expectations are your obligations. Keeping the promise is a simple theory that must be followed."

"What about giving up halfway?"

"You will be criticized, that is politics... Or rather, the biggest problem with the empire is the administrators who don't bring happiness to the people don't face criticism or punishment, or lose their authority."

Altina nodded deeply.

"I see. This means the nation I want to create after becoming empress must be able to criticize and punish me if I fail to deliver happiness to the people."

"... That is so."

"After working so hard to becoming empress, you might be executed under the very law you implement."

"That might be possible... Giving up?"

"Why? The ruler's mistake will cause much suffering and death. If that is so, the one who should suffer most should be the ruler, right?"

Regis remembered something Altina said: "If you want others to risk their lives, you have bet yours too... Something like that..."

"That's it!"

Altina was too animated... Although Regis thought so, he didn't say it out. If Altina doesn't think about protecting herself, the people around her can do so for her.

"I will become empress and change the empire for you to see. If my strength is insufficient, I will take responsibility by giving everything up I have."

The expression of the other party changes.

His face that was a mixture of hate and mockery disappeared, replaced by calm and sincerity.

"I get it now... You seem ready to take responsibility. An attitude full of resolve."

"But I don't plan to fail!"

"Seems like I misunderstood you earlier."

"Really?"

"I thought you are someone who oppresses the citizens and didn't even realize that, a shameless royalty."

"You didn't really misunderstand. I can't even bring happiness to a single person. Even the bread I ate today was taken from the person who worked hard to bake it."

"I see... That's how you think about this."

"I learned it from Regis and practice it immediately."

"... I... Might be wrong too... I always believed a country without taxation is the ideal nation... But in reality, the feeling of unfairness is growing among the citizens. Not fixing a social contract created inequality...?"

"That is a possibility."

"A country needs laws, taxation is required for the benefit of society... If I can't make the citizens happy... I would need to accept criticism and punishment as the leader... Although I have the resolve..."

Diethart's words turned heavy as he gritted his teeth.

It's the trouble of a leader.

In order to support Altina who was at a loss, Regis interjected:

"If the leader of an organization wants to change the policy, clashes and criticism unrelated to it will definitely arise. That's why it's hard to make alterations when things are going well. Mr. Diethart, you are right in your judgment."

"... No... Although I realized it is a fraud, I can't correct it... Because I don't have the purity of the young princess."

Diethart looked at Regis, not with murderous intent like before, but with hints of respect.

"Are you a chamberlain? Or a soldier?"

"I am... A strategist... Something like that."

"Strategist. So the man behind my capture was you."

"... The ones who did it were the troops... But I am the one who planned it."

Was he angry about falling into the trap-- Regis was scared.

It might be a little too late, but Regis straightened his back so Altina won't see his shameful side. Diethart seemed resigned when he said:

"If I... had a strategist like you... I might not have ended up like this."

"You, you flatter me. With the large discrepancy in numbers, winning was only natural."

"No matter what, it is my complete loss... I hope you will not execute the others and at least spare them their lives."

"... That will be decided by the princess."

Altina nodded and continued:

"There is something I want to know... Why did you attack this fort? To seek revenge against the empire?"

"Some citizens of Bargainheim might bear hate against the empire, and some lost their kin in the long years of war. But revenge was not our goal-- Germania federation is pioneering into the forest and threatening our territory."

"This is a pressing matter in some ways."

"Yes... Especially this year, we needed more food and shelter with the increase in population. These issues will be solved if we take this fort."

"Ugh~~ I really wish you guys won't fight the empire, but attack the Varden Duchy."

"That is impossible with fort Volks in the way."

"What is that?"

Altina asked with her head tilted.

Regis whispered into her ears in a hurry.

Using a volume only she could hear:

"... That's the fort of Varden Duchy. In its 40 years of history since its construction, no enemy had ever taken a single step into it. A place worthy of the phrase invincible."

"Ah, so there is such a place."

"... It is shameful for the commander to not know about the enemy fort opposite us."

"I, I know alright. But my opponent so far was something like Sir Jerome or my mood. I will work on those later."

"Well, you are right..."

She wasn't schooled in the way of military commanders, she still needed time to prepare. Right now, Altina was right about the age to enroll in military academy.

Anyway -- Altina pulled the topic back on track.

"So the people of Bargainheim didn't attack us out of hatred."

"Or rather, that wasn't the main reason."

"That is sufficient."

Altina leaned forward, using her right hand to brace against the table as her left was in a sling under her cloak.

"I don't want to execute you!"

"What!?"

"I have a goal, and I can't achieve it with the troops in this fortress alone... I won't make you my subordinate, but I wish for the people of Bargainheim to help me!"

Altina was serious.

Regis was thinking the same thing.

With just the 3000 soldiers of the border regiment, it was impossible to stand up against the influence of the other princes.

The dumbstruck Diethart considered for a moment.

"I see... Not killing me and making me part of your forces. Very logical."

"That means you will help me right?"

Diethart stopped Altina who was all smiles.

"I won't agree to this just for sparing the life of me and my warriors... We have comrades that bear a grudge against the empire. If I bring back acceptable terms, I will be branded a traitor who sold out his country for fear of my life."

"Ah, you are right... What should we do, Regis?"

"No problem. I have read countless treaty between nations and can make an appropriate proposal."

"Phew... That's a big help, but... Why did you even read those things?"

"Hmmm? Isn't such terms free to read?"

"Was it interesting?"

"Ugh-- erm, the early versions were rather boring... Ahh, the High Britannia and Netherlands treaty in the year 890 was great -- in place of 30,000 pounds of silver, tea leaves weighing the same was sent as tribute; there were treaties like this."

"That country loves tea a bit too much!"

"Hahaha... As part of peace negotiation, marriage and gifts are very common."

"What should we give as presents then?"

"Since both parties are negotiating in secret, there isn't a need for souvenirs... Ah, in my humble opinion, I think it would be unnecessary."

"You could have gone without the formalities... So, what terms should be set for this meeting?"

Regis compiled the good parts of all the treaties he had ever read.

"-- Princess Marie Quatre request the nation of Bargainheim for aid. Specifically, to form a common alliance against their neighboring enemy Germania federation. As compensation, food and shelter to tide over the winter will be provided. When the princess ascends the throne as empress, the sovereignty of Bargainheim will be recognized and a non aggression agreement between both nations will take effect."

"Hmm, I see... I don't really get it, but it really sounds like a treaty!"

"You are asking us to be a colony of the empire?"

"I think both sides should be equal in status. Because both man and nation shouldn't have the distinction of being more prestigious than others."

Altina concluded this as a matter of fact.

Diethart was deep in thought.

"I can convince my comrades if these terms can be done."

"That means you will help us right?"

"Yes."

"Thank you!"

Altina extended her right hand.

"Ah..."

Shaking hands might be bad.

Before Regis can stop her, Diethart had already shook his head.

"The troops are watching. The soldiers won't want to follow a princess who treats the king of barbarians as equals."

"Ah, that might be so."

"You have to succeed no matter what, or I will be troubled. This is for the good of my nation too."

"Of course!"

"... That aside, this is really outstanding, it's a rare chance to meet such an excellent person... Someone I want to bring back as my partner."

"Eh!? Partner!?"

That means becoming his bride!?

Diethart nodded.

"Someone I want to spend the rest of my life with, this is the first time I felt this way. This must be love."

"Wait... Wait a...!"

Altina sprung from her chair with her face all red.

"What should I do, Regis!?"

"What to do... Of courses not. Altina is just 14, she can't legally marry."

"Eh, that's the only reason?"

"... No... It should be dependent on your feelings... As for me... If possible... But I don't have the authority to decide and love should be the freedom of the individual, that's how Cuiller described the best way to achieve happiness in his books... Ah, although that author is a bit flirty towards female characters..."

Regis was panicking because Altina received a marriage proposal.

He couldn't express himself fluently.

Altina pouted unhappily.

"Is Regis fine with it if I marry him?"

"... From my position..."

"What are you talking about?"

Diethart stood up.

And walked over without hesitation.

Up close, he was taller than Jerome, his shoulders were broad and full of spirit. Maybe it was the feathers and leather clothing that makes the man.

His large hands held Regis's hand, not Altina's.

It was a hand of a warrior's hand.

Regis's hand was thin and white... compared to him, it was really feminine.

Diethart looked at him with passionate eyes.

"If you could indulge me, I wish for you to come over to Bargainheim to guide me."

"It's me!?"

"Ab~~solutely not!!"

Altina shouted.

She squeezed between them and forcefully separated the two.

"Absolutely not!"

"Ugh, I understand... There is no reason to let such an excellent strategist go."

"Eh? Ah, Yes. Because Regis is my strategist!"

Did he just want to bring me back as a strategist? What a relief -- Regis relaxed as he thought.

He read about the aristocrats of Germania federation preferring men. Because Diethart hailed from the federation, it made Regis broke out in cold sweat.

He was just standing, but this is the first time he had sweated so much.

Diethart knelt before Altina.

"Sparing the lives of my people, providing us with resources and treating us as equals... Princess Marie Quatre, I offer you my gratitude for your aid and promise to support you in accomplishing your grand ambition."

"Thank you. I am grateful for the assistance of you and your nation."

Altina nodded deeply.

Diethart finally smiled.

"I pray for your success."

He spoke in fluent Belgarian.

Regis was reminded of the founding of the empire.

800 years ago--

Adrian Bulgaria was born in the region of Aquitaine which was ruled by several small nations (Present day western region of Bulgaria empire). He had a hard life being raised as a nomad, but it helped him developed unmatched skills in sword and horse riding.

He won every battle he participated in.

And he continued winning. According to legend, in a battle of wits against the gods, he had a one on one duel with a demon king.

The historical accounts were passed down by words of mouth, so much of it was exaggerated...

Adrian Bulgaria became the first emperor of the empire. He was hailed by the people as the Flame emperor because of his hair and eyes that were crimson red.

No chronicles records of when he set his mind on building the empire were found.

The aristocrats claimed the emperor was simply born as one.

Religious teachings preached that he received a revelation from god.

The soldiers and merchants believed that only the victors can call themselves emperor.

Regis thought the most exceptional book he read was the bible. As for why it was exceptional, Regis just needs to state he believes in the bible and save the trouble of arguing with people.

Next would be the works of historical researchers.

Adrian never addressed himself as emperor -- That's what the books proposed.

After the death of King Adrian, those in power deitify him in order to use the massive influence of the great leader to stabilize control over the empire. Adrian's son was groomed to become the 2nd emperor, and evidence was presented to substantiate this point.

And naturally, this position wouldn't be openly accepted...

Regardless of the specifics, Adrian led the nomads in a series of battles, uniting the neighboring nations and building up the strength of his country in order to lay the foundation of a gigantic empire.

The times and situation might be different, but Altina who had obtained the assistance of the barbarians might just be taking her first step on the path to greatness.

When he saw Diethart kneeling in front of Altina--

Regis wondered if he was witnessing a historic event, which made his temperature rise.

Diethart was released and he conveyed the result of the dialogue to the barbarians.

Regis thought there would be complications because of the people who hated the empire. But things sailed over smoothly either because of the influence of the leader or the attractive terms of support in the form of resources.

Or maybe they had lost the will to fight to the bitter end.

The next day, the barbarians were provided with tents and preserved food meant for long campaign.

It's not that they don't trust the other party, but it was no laughing matter if the barbarians were to run away after taking the items. There was also the need to exchange intelligence, so 5 soldiers who can speak Germanian went together with the savages.

After accepting the position of strategist during the climax of the duel, Regis had to log down the battles and peace negotiations that happened on the same day.

And he can't just chronicle everything that happened truthfully.

Regis' administrative work increased by three-fold, something that took 30 people to manage normally.

He spent every day buried in documents and welcomed the new year without realizing it.

Regis recounted painfully several days later:

"Compared to the times when the savages invaded the fort, the retreat when headquarters were burning and facing the grey wolves in the blizzard, I really felt I was going to die..."

Interlude

Year 851 of the Empire.

"Regis~~ Regis~~. Ah, found you."

Altina ran into the officers dining hall.

She seemed to be searching for him. Altina walked opposite Regis and sat down.

It was already 3pm, there were no other officers around.

"Don't shout my name as you walk... I am not a cat or a dog."

"That's not true. Cats and Dogs will respond and run to you if you call out to them."

"... That's correct."

Regis didn't respond when he heard his name being called.

"Even so... Even if I'm worse than a cat or dog, can you not shout my name as you walk?"

"Why?"

"Isn't that embarrassing? I am usually in my room anyway."

"It's better for your health if you exercise once in a while okay?"

"Yes, there seems to be cases of nobles falling sick from the lack of exercise, but that has nothing to do with commoners. And I would rather sleep more for the good of my health..."

"Insomnia?"

"I haven't settled the tasks from last year."

"Ara, that must be tough."

"If you sympathize with me, can you increase the number of admin officers?"

Regis complains in an exhausted voice.

Altina shrugs.

"I have already submitted a request... But it will be hard. News of Beilschmidt not having any admin officers seemed to have spread. No one wants to come because they will be worked to death."

"Please tell the military department I am still alive, so it won't really kill anyone. Just that the documents are spilling from the rooms and there is no time to sleep."

"Can I just tell them what you just said?"

"... Please include in your recruitment request that it is safe, simple and pays relatively well."

"Well, I will settle this appropriately. That aside, listen to this! My friend in the capital sent me a letter!"

Altina took out a white high class envelope.

It was addressed to her.

Regis started doubting his eyes and ears.

"What!?"

"... I didn't say anything that surprising right? What is shocking is the contents..."

"You, you have friends!?"

That was a shock.

Altina frowned.

"You... what did you see me as!?"

"Ah, no... I thought you were isolated in the palace..."

"Ugugu... My relationships with the aristocrats wasn't too good..."

As the two chatted, the maid Clarisse served red tea. She was a mature young lady. She was slightly older than Regis, but that wasn't the reason for her maturity.

"Pardon me, Princess. Would you like some tea?"

"I want some! Thank you."

"You are welcome-- What about Mr. Regis?"

He had this conversation before. Regis thought Clarisse was asking him if he would like some red tea, but she toyed with him saying 'I was asking about your plans for the future'.

In order to not make the same mistake, Regis thought carefully and asked:

"... Erm, are you asking about my plan for the future?"

"Ara, I am so happy. Mr. Regis wants to discuss your future with me? It's a bit embarrassing to do that in front of the princess."

"Eh!?"

"To receive a marriage proposal while I was pouring a cup of red tea. What should I do, Princess?"

Clarisse acted like a maiden in love.

Altina open her eyes wide.

"That was a marriage proposal!?"

"No! That's not what I meant!"

"That, that's right. What a surprise."

"Fufu. Please enjoy your red tea. By the way Princess, is that letter from Sir Baltasar?"

"Yeah."

A big shot from the capital? Regis heard the name before, but he can't remember who it was.

It was the name of a man.

Regis started to panic for some unknown reason.

"Is he Altina's friend?"

"Yes he is. He might be a old man over 60, but he was a famous swordsman. Have you heard of him before?"

"Hmmm? Could it be Baltasar Basil De Balzac!? The top swordsman in the empire?"

"That's right. He came from a clan that was bestowed with the sword of the Flame emperor since the empire's founding. Baltasar might have retired, but he will still show up in the palace from time to time."

"How did you get to know him?"

"I was swinging my sword in the courtyard when he shouted 'Wrong!' at me."

Regis was stunned.

Clarisse shook her head slightly.

There were too many places to retort.

"... The princess was... swinging a sword in the courtyard of the palace?"

"Ahaha, I was 10 back then."

"Not only that day right?"

"Well, almost everyday."

This had nothing to do with being 10 years old, Regis thought.

"... And Sir Baltasar who shouted at the young princess after seeing her sword swing was also..."

"He said that swinging a sword had nothing to do with being a girl or a royalty, you are just a swordsman."

"What an eccentric man."

But if not for that, he wouldn't have spoken to Altina who was ostracised in the palace.

"Since that time, he would teach me about the sword every time he dropped by the palace."

"Teach you!? That Sir Baltasar?"

"Yeah. He doesn't take in students, but he can teach me as a fellow swordsman. And so, we became friends."

"In a book that teaches sword style said that the Balzac clan only passes down their skills within their family and do not take in disciples."

"Ah, I see."

Regis was stunned, but Altina seemed at ease.

Clarisse reminisced:

"Both of them were always happily swinging swords... I served them water often too."

"Is that so~"

"He wanted to teach me too, that was very troubling..."

"Ahaha, that's tight. Maybe Baltasar was just bored."

"But aren’t the skills only passed down within the clan!?"

Maybe he only taught the basics without touching the secret skills. Baltasar was also aged and retired.

But just being the disciple of the strongest swordsman is an impressive title. No wonder Altina was so strong despite having no battle experience.

Why did the elderly swordsman teach the princess who wasn't related to him? Was it on a whim? or did he do so out of pity?

I want to meet and chat with him -- Regis thought.

Altina opened the letter.

"Hmmm~, Baltasar seemed to have heard rumors about our border regiment."

"Rumors?"

"This..."

She laid the letter on the table.

The high quality paper was filled with words that were written in a strong style.

~When you welcome the new year, you should have received this letter.

I have distanced myself from worldly affairs, but I took up my pen after hearing some happy news.

I heard that our barbarians friends to the north had allied with us, bolstering our number by 2 to 3 times.

It reminds me of the legend of the Flame Emperor.

Just imagining the panicking frail nobles made me happy.

I wanted to rush over with the emperor's sword as well, but my wife had regrettably detained me.

My wife is stronger than the swordsman bestowed with the emperor's sword.

I plan to be your senior even in heaven, so don't go there before me.

To my friend From old Baltasar~

"Hmmm... so that's it..."

Regis nodded.

Altina smiled innocently.

"This is great, seemed like the news is already spreading in the empire."

"I asked them to take care not to leak the news out... But it was futile. If so much material was exported, the soldiers will definitely realize it."

"Is it bad for others to know that the barbarians had allied with us?"

"In a sense, this is within the jurisdiction of the lord of the land Sir Jerome and the commander of the fort Altina. But this warning means things might be dire."

"Is that so? I thought it would be better for others to think we are strong..."

"The key to winning in a chaotic battle is to keep a low profile. Baltasar was worried about you too."

"That's what he meant by not going to heaven. So I might die first?"

This was part of the reason. Regis pointed at the letter and said:

"The barbarians are an unknown entity for the people of the empire. The military department is unable to gauge the effect of their support, whether the regiment's strength had grown by 2 or 3 times. This is obviously a military matter, but he mentioned the nobles panicking, so they might be unhappy with you."

"That's what it says?"

"The aristocrats likes to look down on others just like their love for red wine, and they don't feel guilty about doing that. But if the subject of their scorn were to pick up their swords, they will review their past actions... and become afraid. In their eyes you are no different from the devil."

"I think they are the devils sucking blood from the citizens..."

Influence by her mother who was born a commoner, Altina was aware of the feelings of the citizens.

"In summary, Regis is worried that we will be disliked by the nobles, right?"

"That's a simple way of putting it. That's what happened to Sir Jerome."

"Ah." Altina nodded.

Jerome performed too well on the battlefield and was ostracized by the other nobles. He was sent to the borders and chased out of the imperial capital.

He had never lost a duel before and was very capable in commanding troops.

"They thought things will be fine if they exiled the hero and the princess to the tough environment of the front lines. But they obtained power from an unexpected source... What would you do if you were in their shoes?"

"Summon them back?"

"That is the ideal method. It is easier to handle things within your line of sight, but this is unlikely. Nobles place emphasis on presentation and feelings, they won't ask someone who they are hostile against to come back.

"Indeed. Will they forbid the alliance with the barbarians?"

"That will be easy to handle... The reports didn't mention any alliance, so we will be fine if the treaty was drawn up in secret."

"Ugh, they will definitely do something right?"

"I hope it's nothing too drastic."

There were tons of ways to deplete the regiment's forces.

And the 2nd Prince Latreille was said to be a smart man.

He will definitely do something about the border regiment and it's unexpected reinforcements.

"... We need to think of countermeasures."

Chapter 2: To Rebel or Accede

8Li (35km) away from Sierck Fortress, in the northern city Tuonvell.

2 people in military dressing arrived with a high class carriage.

One of the men was short and skinny, his uniform decorated with medals and jewellery, and his eyes were slits like a fox.

A sabre hung from his waist.

The man was Becker.

A noble of the empire, serving as an inspector in the military department.

The other person was a giant fat man 27Pa (200cm) tall.

His face was like a boulder and a broad long sword was worn at his waist.

He was Becker's escort officer, Grade 4 combat officer Boislow.

Boislow put his hand on his stomach as he sighed longingly while looking at the shops along the streets.

"So good... they are roasting chicken over there, Sir Becker."

"You are talking about food again!"

Becker squinted his eyes as he kicked Boislow and spat on the road.

"Damn it, where is the welcome party!?"

"They should be in the northern plaza of Tuonvell."

"They want me to walk over? What a poor reception, that's why I hate the countryside. They have no manners at all."

Becker complained as he walked and knocked into a child who was running.

"Ah."

"Ugh...!?"

The child was a boy about 6 years old who blinked and lowered his head.

"Sor, Sorry!"

From his dressing, he should be a commoner's child. His clothes weren’t ragged, but they aren’t classy either. His shoes were made from linen.

In contrast with his uncouth behavior earlier, Becker smiled gently.

"... Ara~ are you okay, little friend?"

He took out a high class handkerchief from his chest pocket.

The child nodded.

"Yea, I'm alright."

"Are you sure? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"I am fine, Mister!"

"Is that so? But I don't think so... You are injured."

"Where?"

Becker held the handkerchief with his left hand while grabbing the hilt of his sword with his right.

Boislow was biting on his fingers as he looked at the stalls. He was ignoring the matter with the child completely.

Becker had a gentle smile on his lips while his eyes turned bloodshot.

"Where are you hurt? You really don't know? Let me tell you... It's on your neck...!!"

As he was about to draw his sword, someone called out his name from nearby:

"Inspector Becker!"

The sound of hooves and a carriage closed in.

The blond youth on the military carriage was Eric.

"Are you inspector Becker!? I have come from Sierck fort to receive you! I am Eric Michael de Blanchard from the Beilschmidt border regiment."

After driving close with the carriage, he jumped off the driver's seat.

Eric was handsome enough to turn heads on the streets.

Becker gritted his teeth as he continued to smile.

He moved his hand away from his sabre.

"Ara, I am grateful... But this is earlier than we arranged..."

He took out a golden watch from his pocket to check the time. He could have done so through the clock mounted on top of the church.

Eric stood at attention with his feet closed and saluted by placing his right hand on his left chest.

"Her highness Marie Quatre had arranged for me to come earlier."

Becker's face changed when he heard the princess' name.

"Oh... Her highness made an arrangement for me?"

"Of course, inspector Becker. Her highness wants to hear news about the imperial capital. Please board the carriage. It might be a bit shaky because it belongs to the military, please bear with it."

"Hmmm -- We are leaving, Boislow."

"Ah, yes... Hah... I am hungry."

The inspector and the escort officer boarded the carriage.

A woman ran out from the crowd and rushed to the child who was watching blankly.

She hugged him tightly.

And lowered her head deeply in gratitude.

Eric breathe a sigh of relief and nodded in acknowledgement.

"That inspector was too much!"

Eric was uncharacteristically angry.

The location was in Regis' room.

"I see... Picking him up early was the right choice. He actually wanted to draw a sword on a child..."

Regis read his books as he answered tiredly.

Eric placed his hands on the table and leaned forward.

"It would have been a big tragedy if I was late. You knew this might happen!?"

"The weather was great these few days, so I presumed the carriage might arrive early. The snow might be piling up here, but it shouldn't be so bad on the road... And the lower nobles throwing their weight around when they are dispatched from the capital is already the norm."

"Really?"

"Yes, the antagonist in this book I'm reading is exactly the same as that guy."

"Fufufu... Sir Regis is always hiding your foresight in this manner."

Eric was staring at Regis.

I seemed to have earned his respect, I am grateful but... Regis seemed to sensed there was something more than that.

"... I wasn't trying to hide it though."

"Does the princess really want to meet that man?"

"Hmmm?"

"Didn't you tell me that?"

"Ahh, that was just a social manners... I only told Altina the inspector was coming. She is not the type who can handle such people delicately."

"I am the same in that aspect alright?"

"Haha... Sorry about that."

"It's fine, since it's for Sir Regis. Anyway, that man is dangerous so be careful."

"Is that so... it's about time."

Altina needs to receive the letter of notice before dinner.

The letter could have been sent when the inspector arrived, but the aristocrats prefer following proper manners and protocol, making this a pain. They probably think they are great people.

Regis pouted because his valuable reading time was shortened.

After the storeroom was tidied up, it became the audience room.

A chandelier taken from somewhere was hung up, the walls were decorated with drapes, revamping the room.

The place for the princess to meet her guest can't always be in the courtyard-- the soldiers arranged the place under Evrard's instructions.

Eric seemed to be the one who did the design.

Jerome might be a noble, but he was totally uninterested in this. If he really needed a room, he would use the one in the Margrave residence.

This was the first audience room set up in Sierck fort.

But as per Altina's request, it wasn't set up so that the guest have to look up at the host's chair. A table was placed in the middle like a dining room.

She sat down on the innermost seat.

Altina's left hand was still secured by a sling, so a cloak covered the left side of her body.

Besides her were Becker and Boislow. Security was relaxed since they weren't separated by guards, but Regis agreed to this since they were less dangerous than Diethart.

Clarisse wordlessly served red tea.

Oh~~~, Becker looked all over her with lustful eyes.

Altina spoke first.

"It must have been a long and hard journey, inspector."

"Ah, yes, this is my first time to such a far destination... Ah no, the scenery here is great."

"Ahaha... Don't need to worry. You must be shocked at how rural this place is."

The conversation progressed smoothly.

Before royalty, Becker had an attitude as well mannered as a dog.

Boislow reached out for the raisins and fruits that were served with red tea.

Altina was seated at the innermost seat of the table, to her right are Becker and Boislow.

To her left was Regis and Eric who was aspiring to be an escort officer.

Evrard and the other troops were standing by at the door, they were not participants, but guards.

Jerome should be seated here too, but he disappeared saying it was a pain, not even giving a proper excuse.

Eric whispered to Regis:

"... Did you tell the princess about the earlier incident?"

"... It would be bad if I did... She will definitely complain against the inspector. We will be marked by the military department if the inspector got hurt, turning this into a troublesome matter."

Regis replied in a volume only Eric can hear.

Indeed... Eric nodded as he replied.

"Did you bring a letter along?"

"Yes."

Becker slowly took out a letter with a lofty expression.

"This is from general Latreille."

"Latreille wrote this..."

Altina's face turned moody.

That was the man who exiled her to this place.

Even though they had different mothers, he was still Altina's brother.

She took the letter but didn't open it.

Her expression will darken even more if she read it.

"... Fort Volks?"

Altina handed the letter over to Regis.

She wanted him to read it.

"Pardon me."

He took the letter.

There was a long paragraph of social greeting, thanking his sister for her hard work at the borders.

After browsing through it, the summarized version of the orders was as followed.

-- to seize fort Volks of Varden Republic and the Germania federation.

"This is..."

Regis exclaimed with a sigh.

Altina leaned towards him.

"That is the amazing fort right? They want us to take it by ourselves, that's the order right?"

Eric's expression changed.

"To attack fort Volks with this regiment alone!?"

"Yes... That's the order."

"That's asking too much!"

Altina asked Eric.

"As I thought, is it very difficult?"

"Your highness, that is the invincible fortress! We had attacked it several times in the past, but we failed even with 10,000 men!"

"Now that you mentioned it, Diethart did said they can't attack Varden because of that fort."

Regis thought about the books he read.

"... I remember the records tell of 4 attempts by the empire. The first was 3000 troops, the 2nd were 8000 soldiers. The next two were 10,000 men each."

"We didn't win?"

"Erm... Ah, yes your highness. We failed."

Regis had to use respectful language in front of others.

Although Altina insisted that the choice of words doesn't matter.

"How large a force can we muster for the attack?"

"With 1000 staying for defense, we can send about 2000 men."

"That's all?"

"Yes, that's all... The order stated the attack had to be carried out by February 12th, there is no time to increase our numbers."

It was only natural for her to have a troubled expression.

"Could it be impossible?"

"That is so..."

Eric stood up.

"I think so too! Anyway, such an order is too absurd!"

Evrard and the soldiers standing by at the door looked at each other.

The atmosphere turned rowdy.

Only Becker was smiling with ease.

In fact, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Isn't it rude to dismiss the order as unreasonable? That order was proposed by Field Marshal Latreille and approved by the Military Department, it is as good as an order from the emperor. As a soldier of the empire, there is nothing more glorious than this."

A voice filled with cruelty.

This man probably took joy in forcing unreasonable demands on others in the name of the emperor.

Eric glared at him.

"Ugh... If there is glory in this, why don't you lead the charge as the vanguard! You might change your view after taking a bullet from the enemy."

"Oh? You dare insult me even though you are just an underling... You... What's your name?"

"Eric Michael de Blanchard. Didn't you hear me introduce myself?"

"Hmmp... I have no interest in family names I have never heard before."

With the messenger delivering such an order, it was hard to maintain a pleasant atmosphere for their conversation.

And with the incident that happened on the street, the young Eric became emotional.

Regis raised his hand to stop them.

"... We have received the letter and the content is clear to us. That should be all."

"Hmmm. If you will carry out the contents, there will be no problems with the contents of the letter... But the inspection of this border regiment will be a separate manner."

"Let's not waste the princess' time with such routine administrative matters."

"Hmmm? You are right."

Becker nodded.

He moved as he spoke sarcastically.

"I heard that the regiment had been bolstered by many irregular troops... I looked forward to your grandiose achievement for the emperor."

"... Irregular troops? We did hire some maids from the streets not long ago... You wish for them to help in attacking the fort?"

Regis pretended to not understand what he meant.

After the hostile meeting ended.

Regis explained the documents to Becker.

The inspector wasn't dispatched here as a courier. He was here to audit the documents and make sure the orders are carried out. It was their job to report any issues to central.

Regis thought it would take a lot of time to go through the huge amount of paper work... But Becker seemed uninterested and returned to his guest room surprisingly early.

Sometime later--

It was already evening, so candles were lit in order for Regis to sort out his documents.

Someone knocked on his door as he did his admin work alone.

"Hmmm? Please come in..."

The door was opened.

The visitor was a girl with crimson hair.

"Evening, Regis."

"Ah... Altina... You came again at such a late hour..."

"What?"

"Nothing... Although it's fine, but take care not to let bad rumors spread."

"Hmmm?"

Altina tilted her head, she doesn't seem to understand.

Regis gave up explaining and simply told her "Don't visit others at night too often."

"As usual, papers of unknown purpose are piled around here."

"... There are documents you need to sign here too."

"Ara? If you just need me to sign, I can do that right?"

"Really? Then take it away later. This pile that pile, and that small mountain over there..."

"I can't write very fast though."

"Hah..."

"That inspector must be up to something."

"... That's right. he checked his watch multiple times during dinner, that is unusual."

"Not that... It just give me a bad vibe."

"Ugh... Well, probably."

"Do you know something?"

"I heard something from Eric. He had been auditing my documents so far... instead of whether the administrative matters are done properly, he was more interested in bribery."

Altina widen her eyes.

"Eh? What?"

"This means no matter how well the report was written, he will find fault with it saying this part was hard to understand, that part was not to his liking or this word is smudged."

"So he is looking for trouble!"

"... 'Give me money if you want me to go easy on you', that's how it feels."

Jerome accused Regis of bribery the first time they met because he met too many people of this kind.

Altina turned to leave, reaching for the door handle.

"I will teach him a lesson!"

"Wait wait! Such arrangements had turned into the norm! Even though he might be a bad egg, he is not the only one."

"Did you give him any bribe!?"

She stared at him sternly.

Regis shook his head.

"It will make you angry, so I won't do that... I think things will be easier if some were given in moderation."

"I won't forgive that."

"Won't forgive him? Or me?"

"Both of you!! I need to correct that man's twisted character!"

"That would be troublesome. He has connections within the military department, it won't be so easy to settle it if you make him angry... You might even get summoned to face the disciplinary committee.."

"Who cares!"

"They won't summon you since you are the princess... In this situation, the one to be summoned will be me."

"Ugh!?"

It was a bit too much to play the role off the hostage -- Regis thought, but it couldn't be helped. Altina wouldn't be able to build up her own base if she rampaged here.

"The inspector should have some connections within the military department... He wouldn't be inspector if not for that... Making enemies is not the right move."

"He has a strong backing, that's why he keeps taunting Eric asking for bribes."

"That's how it is."

He even dares to look at Altina and Clarisse with lustful eyes, although Altina didn't notice. Now is not the time to fan the fire.

Altina's fist trembles as she couldn't find any outlet to vent her wrath.

"Ugh---!!"

Regis changed the topic.

"Rather than this... You are here to discuss the orders from prince Latreille right?"

"Ah, right! What should we do?"

“Fort Volks huh..."

"What kind of fort is it? I have never seen it before."

"Me neither. If possible, I don't want to ever see it... According to the books, on a smooth slope, there is a cliff just like a wall that is about 225Co (100m) tall."

That was 6 times taller than the Sierck fort they were in.

"And there is a platform on the cliff fixed with cannons, about 100Co (44m) in height."

"That is taller than the highest structure in the empire."

"The cliff covers the south and east, north and west of it are the mountain ranges."

"Can't we attack from the mountain range side?"

"A deep trench was dug in the west when they were building the fort. It is possible to avoid the cannons when you approach it, but there is no other way other than to go down that trench before climbing out of it to reach the fort, so it's not much better... There were caves to the north when it was simply used as a mine. It is less steep, but it is still a trench, and it seemed to have been turned into a pond because of the water trapped in it."

"Can't we ignore the fort and go straight for their capital?"

"We will definitely lose if our opponents right behind us are disrupting our supply route.... They will have a steady supply of resources, while we will have to raise the white flag after exhausting our food supply."

"Ah, that's right. How about attacking the enemies while they are out of the fort?"

"They will just escape back to the fort correct? If you pursue them, that would be no different from attacking the fort head on... The cannon balls will come flying."

"I see."

"During the past 4 attempts, the empire tried raiding at night and laying siege..."

They are in this situation right now because those attempts failed.

The fort was excellent and the enemy commander was brilliant too.

Regis complained:

"If possible, I really don't want to do this..."

"That's impossible."

"Ah..."

Princes Latreille had adopted an excellent measure to turn the situation like this. The prince seemed adept in dealing with opponents who obtained powers beyond his expectation.

Altina stated her resolve.

"We have to do this! Latreille must be sure we can do it when he gave that order."

"Eh?"

"... What? The orders are here, that means he is certain we can take the fort right?"

"... No."

"Huh?"

Altina looked amazed.

This child is too pure and innocent.

"What Latreille wants... Is for you to lose most of your forces after attacking the invincible fort, diminishing your influences and soldiers under your command."

"Why? The plan will fail?"

"But it will cut off the border regiments power which had grown unexpectedly right? That's the intent of that order."

"What did you say!?"

Altina's face turned red in anger again.

She slammed her hand onto the table.

Judging from the sound that echoed in the room, that must be painful.

"-- what does he think the lives of soldiers are!?"

Latreille definitely values them on the same level of chess pieces.

"Calm down Altina... I don't plan to sacrifice the troops."

"You have any ideas in mind!? Ah, you have to carry out the order though."

"With inspector Becker here, we can't fudge this."

"Even if we fought as ordered, he will probably report it as a halfhearted attempt."

"That's why we need to appease him..."

Altina fell into deep thought. She was working hard in her own way to protect the soldiers.

"Eh... What will happen if we ignored the order?"

"That will be treason... We will be branded as rebels and the empire's first army will campaign against us."

"Rebels!?"

"You are already prepared for that right?"

"That's true... But they are strong right?"

"Yes. I mentioned it before briefly, the first army gathers the strongest soldiers within the nation and equipped them with the newest gears, the best army in the empire. They have intelligence about the situation at the borders too, if we were to fight... It would be dire."

"We can't win?"

"Going by common sense, that's impossible... We won't know if Jerome and Evrard will fight on our side. The soldiers are not ready for a clash with prince Laterleo."

Altina bit her lips.

"... That is true... What should we do?"

"We have to attack the fort... And minimize our casualties. To achieve this, there was no other way then leaving a good impression on inspector Becker so he will report in our favor to the military department."

"How frustrating."

"What a simple comment. I feel the same, but it can't be helped."

Regis opened the book on his desk.

"Well, I have already researched intensively on the details of Fort Volks, so you need to heal your left arm as soon as possible."

"I know... Hmm?"

"What's the matter?"

Did she finally developed an interest in books? Altina looked at Regis' desk.

It was a book made by an old technique, using leather ropes to bind the pages together and carving the book title on the book jacket. A book that was made delicately.

It was old and the colors were fading.

"Could this be a book about Fort Volks?"

"Ah, I suspect this might happen... Well, not really, I just found this while walking the streets. This book was made 40 years ago and chronicles things that happened in the past."

50 years ago--

Year of the empire 800, before the current emperor Liam 15th was crowned.

It was the reign of the previous emperor Vicente Winston. He chose his ministers based on their talent in poetry and literature and was talented in the arts, making major contributions to the culture of the empire.

The technological advanced in paper and printing were the results of the emperor investing a substantial budget in it.

But the budget for military expenses were cut, and without the proper recruitment of talent, the empire was losing its war on all fronts.

The territory near Tuonvell were also taken by the Varden Duchy for a long time.

After Emperor Vicente Winston succumbed to illness, the young Liam the 15th succeeded the throne.

General Corneille Arneal was promoted to Field Marshal. The emperor was the commander in chief of the army, so the rank of Field Marshal didn't exist. But the situation doesn't allow the emperor who wasn't well versed in military affairs to take command.

The empire lost 30% of its territory during this period.

Corneille Arneal reorganized the weakened military and made war on all fronts, defeating the enemies of the empire and pushed the front lines back.

The northern borders were seized back from the Varden Duchy. The Duchy was pushed all the way back and the army advanced towards its capital.

The hills of the Varden Duchy contains high quality iron ore, so a mine was set up.

That was the Volks mines.

The empire army never imagined the mines they set up to become the invincible fort.

10 years later-- Field Marshal Corneille Arneal died in battle and the military once again falls into chaos, the empire suffered counter attacks from all sides.

In the end, the front lines were pulled back, becoming the current situation today.

Year of the empire 812, The Duchy transforms the Volks mines into an impenetrable fortress, the focus of defense against the empire.

On the other hand, the empire rebuild the farming village of Tuonvell into a border city, constructing a stronghold to oppose Fort Volks.

And that was Sierck Fort Regis and the others were in.

"-- and so, it is a book about the details of the Fort."

"Is it a book from that era?"

"That's right, like I mentioned, it chronicles the events up to the fortification of the Volks mines, it was written about 40 years ago. It was part of a series of books recording the recapture of the northern regions and Tuonvell history. It was one of 8 books... Although paper making techniques were quite advance, the bookbinding skills were less developed. So this book was made in quite a unique way."

"Hmmm~ it must be expensive."

Altina attacked from an unexpected area.

Regis became stiff.

"Not really..."

"Where is your sword?"

"I will only hurt myself if I swing that around."

"Where is it?"

"... Before we go any further, I want to make this clear... That wasn't issued by the government, but is my personal item alright?"

"Yah? And where did you put it?"

"Tuonvell city's... Pawn shop. If it hasn't been sold."

"How can a soldier pawn his sword!?"

Shya-- Altina pressed forward menacingly.

Regis leaned back in his chair, almost toppling over.

"Because it was rusting from lack of use..."

"How much is that book!?"

"It's not that expensive, 200..."

"Phew~ hmmm? 200 copper coins? You should be able to afford that with your weekly wages, but that is still too expensive."

"No... It's silver coins."

A silver coin was worth a dozen copper coins.

Altina's shoulders were creaking from rage.

Her silky white hand grabbed Regis's head. Her left arm was secured in a sling, so she only used her right hand.

"Are you an idiot!? Hnng!? You are definitely an idiot!"

"Am I one or not? Although I don't regret this..."

"Regret it right now!"

"But, but this is a valuable book. The contents are amazing, and it's historical value..."

"How did you come up with 200 silver coins!?"

"Well~ I was probably pushing myself... Words had spread in town that I am now the strategist. So the shopkeeper was fine with putting me on his tab."

"And now you are in debt!"

Altina's fingers grabbing Regis' head tighten.

That hurt.

"No no, that's just keeping a tab, it's different from owing a debt..."

"Listen!"

"Yes."

"My mother told me this-- commoners live in poverty, but they won't lose their life because they are poor. If they don't owe any debts."

"Well, the empire is rather prosperous."

"If you understand then don't borrow money to buy books!"

"That hurts... Painful, Altina, your hand is creaking... My head..."

"If you need such an expensive book, discuss it with me! You are my strategist."

She looked at him sincerely.

Regis felt guilty once again.

"... I can't do that."

"Why!?"

"Because this book... Wasn't bought out of the regiment needs, it's purely for my own hobby pain pain pain!?"

"You are splurging money!"

He can't deny that.

Finally, Altina released her hand.

She can wield that heavy sword with one hand, so it was so painful that Regis' tears were falling, even though she wasn't being serious.

"Ever since I made my sister mad by enrolling in the military academy, no one had lectured me like this,"

"Your sister was having a hard times too... Can't be helped, I will lend you the money, so return it as soon as possible."

"Eh? No, that's a bit..."

"That's better than rumors spreading in the street about the strategist owing money right?"

"Ugh-- yeah..."

"What's the matter? You don't need to hold back okay?"

"Really? Since I will be borrowing money, there are 2 more books I really want... Ah, nothing, it's nothing!"

"Ah, really, what a book nerd--!!"

The next day, Regis cleared his tabs.

There was only one carriage trip a day, so Regis spent the night at the guard post before returning the next day.

When he opened the door to his room,

"Eh?"

"Hyaa!?"

Eric who was sitting on the chair jumped.

That squeal was just like a girl -- Regis thought.

"... Erm... What's wrong? Why are you in my room?"

"Ah, that's... I'm very sorry... I entered to look for you since you seemed to be absent..."

"I took a trip to town. Didn't the princess tell you?"

"I see. The princess is not someone those without status can talk to easily. Sir Regis is special."

"... I see."

Altina had a casual attitude and it confused Regis sometimes. But she is the princess and commander, not someone you ask if you want to find a 5th grade admin officer.

Not having a reporting officer or subordinate was inconvenient in such cases.

"But why are you sitting on my chair if you were looking for me...?"

"Ugh... That... Erm... I was wondering... What Sir Regis usually thinks about..."

He said these words while blushing.

His bashful and uncertain movements were nothing like a knight, he was acting just like a girl.

Regis' lips cramped for a moment.

"... What a refreshing way of looking for someone."

"My, my apologies."

"Well, it's fine... you have anything for me?"

Eric took a deep breath and calmed down, turning back to his usual serious expression.

"Phew... It's about the fort. It might not be appropriate for me to ask, but what do you plan to do?"

"Ugh... It's about time to make a decision... But no matter what, we will need time to prepare."

Going by Latreille's orders, they have about a month left to execute the attack.

They need to discuss about this.

Regis gave instructions to Eric.

"Can you help me invite Sir Jerome and Mr. Evrard to the conference room? I need to invite the princess, so I will make a move first."

"Understood. They are conducting training outside the fort right now. Please wait for a moment."

"Training huh, how passionate."

"Attacking Fort Volks is a serious matter."

"Yeah..."

"I will take my leave."

Eric stood at attention and left the room briskly.

Regis tidied up the necessary documents and left for Altina's room with the bundle of papers in hand.

He passed by the dining hall on his way there.

"Hya..."

He heard a faint scream.

"Hmmm?"

He headed into the dining hall. The tables were clean and arranged neatly as usual. The clock on the wall indicated the time to be 2pm.

The officers had been mobilized for the training by Jerome, no one was around.

Regis noticed the rag that was left on the table.

Clarisse was the one cleaning this hall. If it's her, she wouldn't leave her job half done...

There were always exceptions. It won't take much time to bring the rag from the hall to the kitchen.

Regis took the rag on the table.

It was wet, meaning it was being used just now.

"... Did something urgent happen?"

Faint sounds could be heard coming from the kitchen.

Someone was probably preparing for dinner? That might be Clarisse.

Regis walked towards the passage leading to the kitchen.

"Erm, sorry for intruding..."

He said as he peeped inside.

The kitchen was a semi-circle that seemed to protrude out of the tower.

The preparation stations were on either side of the stove.

Standing there were a skinny man with fox-like slit eyes in military uniform and a boulder like giant man. They were inspector Becker and escort officer Boislow.

And opposite them--

A girl with her brown hair tied behind her and wearing a blue maid uniform was lying on the floor.

Regis suspected his eyes weren't working.

"... Wha!?"

The girl who lifted her head was definitely Clarisse.

After glancing this way, she lowered her eyes.

"Sir Regis... you can't come here..."

"What are you... doing!?"

Becker snorted.

"Hmmp, you didn't give the things you should give, so I came to look for replacements. Or did you change your mind?"

"... You... I heard that inspectors were mean people but... to go this far!"

"Hey hey, you are just a lowly non-commissioned officers. I am an inspector alright? Are you sure you want to receive a lousy report?"

"Ugh... Ms Clarisse! Come here. The princess won't be happy even if you followed the orders of this guy."

"That is... I understand but..."

She stood up and walked towards Regis with fearful steps.

When she reached him, she hugged Regis tightly.

"Sir Regis."

"Ah, eh..."

She was shivering.

This was the first time Regis saw Clarisse acting so weak.

Becker spat.

"What, I thought you were just an inept strategist, now you are role playing as a knight? No money and no honey, what kind of joke is this! No, this won't do. Seems like this border regiment is planning a revolt~ Hmm?"

"Don't talk nonsense... Your actions are clearly against military protocol. Inspector Becker I will lodge a complaint against you in military court."

"Oh, did I do something? I didn't, so don't make me laugh."

"Asking for bribes, attempted rape... Just this will be enough. There will be more dirt to dig up if we investigate the places you were assigned to, right?"

Becker clicked his tongue.

He gestured to Boislow with his chin.

"Shut him up forever."

"Wargh!!"

Regis hugged Clarisse tightly as he retreated.

His documents fell all over the ground.

"Haha! I will shut your mouth!"

Regis felt killing intent.

Becker mumbled as if this doesn't concern him.

"Ah~ That's a good woman, such a pity."

Regis left the kitchen and went into the dining hall.

He pulled Clarisse by the hand, running through the gaps of the tables and headed for the door.

But Boislow had a speed that doesn't match his large body.

No, maybe Regis was simply too slow.

Boislow took another path and made it to the entrance before they did.

"Wahaha!"

"Ugh..."

The officers dining hall was situated on the first floor and had no large windows. There were some small windows letting in sunlight, but it was too small for anyone to fit in.

Like a beast licking its lips before its prey, Boislow slowly drew his sword.

Suddenly, Clarisse grabbed Regis' hand with both of her hands.

"Sir Regis... I just need to bear with this... It will be fine. Such things are unavoidable."

"Sacrificing you to save myself? That's the worse... I would rather die."

"You are someone irreplaceable to the princess."

"Ms Clarisse... Everyone will die some day. I believe a person who abandoned his principles is dead from that very moment."

"Even so, there will also be times you have to bear with the humiliation before you can achieve something."

"... If it was me enduring the humiliation, I can take it somehow... But I cannot let it go if someone like you were to suffer."

"Sir Regis... A woman like me... saying such words to me is forbidden."

Boislow closed in.

He was right before them!

"Hahaha, both of you can lose your heads together!"

The giant man raised his sword towards the roof and swung down.

Regis hugged Clarisse tightly to protect her, Clarisse was also hugging Regis. Regis was frustrated with himself for being so useless that he can't even be her shield.

Boislow who was grinning like a carnivorous beast--

Made a pained expression suddenly.

"Warghhh!?"

A large of amount blood was spilled onto his feet.

The giant man fell.

"Eh...?"

Regis didn't understand what was happening.

A young man was standing behind Boislow. It was Eric who was holding a bloodied sword in his hand.

"Hah, hah, hah... Are you alright Sir Regis!? You too Miss..."

Regis nodded silently.

Regis looked at Boislow who was lying on the ground.

"Is... is he dead?"

"I avoided hitting his vitals."

The giant man was moaning on the floor.

Blood was flowing out of a large wound that went from his buttocks to his right inner thigh. It was indeed a non-fatal wound.

But he was in no condition to chase them or swing a sword.

Regis put his hand on his own chest in relief.

"... We are saved... Thank you Eric."

"Don't mention it, I am glad to help Sir Regis."

"How did you know where I was?"

"You were not in the conference room, so I was looking for you. Thankfully, you are safe... Next will be punishment for him."

Eric looked towards the interior of the dining hall.

Becker had a bitter face.

"Ugh~ Isn't it despicable for a knight to strike from behind?"

His eyes were glaring dangerously.

Like a demon mentioned in the bible.

Eric took a stance with his sword fearlessly.

"I will gladly accept if you want to press charges against me... But that will be after you get thrown into the dungeons!"

Regis stared at him unconsciously.

Not just his looks, Eric's action was just like a knight from fairy tales. It might be a bit too exaggerated, but it really described him well.

Becker's eyes were bloodshot.

Drool was dripping from a corner of his lips.

"You you you... Plebeian! You dare throw me in the dungeon!?"

Becker didn't draw the sword on his waist, but the hidden short barreled gun from his shirt.

That was the latest design of short barreled gun from high Britannia.

There was a need to load the bullet first, but it saved the hassle of lighting a fire, it was ready to shoot once you aim it.

Eric bit his lips.

He stood a chance if this was an open plain, but this place was cluttered by the groaning giant man and tables, it was hard to take the initiative with his sword.

The gun needed to be reloaded after a single shot, there will be a way if they could defend against the first bullet. But they would definitely be hit at such a close distance.

And Becker can kill Regis and Clarisse after shooting Eric with the gun. He seemed to be considering how the scenario might pan out, so he didn't attack immediately.

Regis flipped through the books he had read in his mind, looking for a solution.

"... This, is probably the best way."

"What are your plans, Sir Regis?"

Clarisse held on to the sleeve of Regis' uniform.

"... I have never lost in chess before, leaves this to me."

He gently push her hand away.

Clarisse looked as if she was sobbing.

To save all 3 of them without risking anything in such a situation. Such magic doesn't exist.

The basic of chess was to use the weaker piece as bait in order for the stronger piece to survive.

In this cases, Regis was the weaker piece.

Regis charged at Becker.

"Wahh--!!"

He yelled while running.

That was unexpected, shocking Becker.

"Huh!? Don't look down on me!"

The fight will be decided once Becker shot Regis... But Regis' weak point was sword fighting.

Becker shifted the gun to his left hand, drawing his sabre with his right.

So fast!

Regis was forced to stop 3 paces away by the sabre aimed at him.

He raised his hands.

"... I messed up... I should read more action series books."

Regis knew Becker had a sabre, but he didn't expect him to draw it so fast. Regis was bad in judging combat capabilities.

Becker raised his sabre.

"I will start... With you!!"

"Let's make a deal!"

"Huh!?"

Becker stilled his sabre because of Regis' words.

Eric and Clarisse who were watching them intently held their breath.

The air was tensed.

"... Let's make a deal, inspector Becker... Do you think you can get away after killing the 3 of us? What about Eric after taking me down? Shoot him? I think Ms Clarisse would run away while you do all that."

"Hah! I can catch up with a woman in no time."

"... What are you going to say to the soldiers who hear her screams? The princess likes Ms Clarisse so much that she brought Ms Clarisse along all the way from the imperial capital."

"Huh?"

"... Inspector Becker... How about letting us go this time? This way, we can pretend we didn't witness any of your crimes. How about it?"

"You think I will believe that?"

"You are worried about that? If we were to press charges, you just need to deny them. Don't you think an unused gun is more advantageous in the court of law?"

"It's faster to just kill all of you!"

"Using your sword and gun? How would you prove your innocence with a bloodied sword and fired gun in your hands? Or did you think you can exert pressure on the princess through your noble lineage?"

"No... That..."

"It would be better to think this over... I am now a hostage, so Eric can't make any sudden moves. This is a question that will decide your life. If you consider it carefully, you will see that my proposal is a better solution. Ah, right, there were similar incidents like this. I will explain them briefly, please listen--"

Regis gave 3 stories depicting successful negotiations.

Just when his hands that were raised were starting to ache.

"What are you doing!?"

The girl with crimson hair showed up in the dining hall, it's Altina!

Behind her were Jerome and Evrard.

Eric and Clarisse relaxed.

Phew~~~~~ Regis breathe easy.

"Finally here?"

"Even Eric didn't come back, so I decided to take a look to see what happened... What is going on!?"

Altina glared.

Becker's face turned pale.

"Not, nothing... This... Is a misunderstanding!"

Regis can finally lower his hands.

"Clarisse was being assaulted... When I said I will press charges, he charged at us."

"You little!? Didn't you want to make a deal!?"

Becker roared.

Regis shook his head.

"My apologies... But proposing a deal is a way of buying time. Men will lose their cool when an opportunity presents itself. For example, when you had to kill 3 people and one of them charge at you first. A charming proposal might be bait for a trap... It is normal to be confused, it's a decision that will decide the future of your life... Well, someone will come if I drag for time."

Becker's eyes turned bloodshot.

Will he shoot because of agitation? Regis was worrying about this... But Becker suddenly sighed.

"Oh~~, why did it turn out this way! My subordinate was attacked from behind without reason, I had no choice but to draw my gun, now you are pushing the blame on me!? This is a conspiracy! A trap to frame me!"

"... What are you trying to say at this late juncture?"

"I think I will report it this way when I return to the military department in the imperial capital... Beilschmidt is a well disciplined and excellent army, charging Fort Volks courageously and was forced to retreat after taking heavy losses... Fufufu, how does that sound?"

Becker smiled coldly and looked towards Altina.

He meant using a false report to trade for dismissing his crimes, a proposal like this.

The tables had turned.

The difference was in reaction speed.

Regis came to a conclusion instantly and was about to speak. But Altina rushed out faster than him.

She clenched her right fist.

And threw it at Becker's smirking face.

With that man's face as the target, Altina raised her right fist -- and punched!

"You moron!!"

Bang!

"Shya!?"

Becker flew.

His back hit the dining hall's wall.

The sabre and the short barreled gun rolled on the floor.

Thankfully, it didn't misfire.

Blood flowed out from the battered nose.

"Woah... Blood... From my... Nose... Blood.... My nose!?"

"I will only say one thing to you!"

Becker pressed his nose and looked up.

Altina was standing before him.

Pointing at him.

"I would rather die than negotiate with the bad guys!"

Becker slid down the wall he was leaning against and collapsed onto the ground.

Evrard and Eric restrained Becker and Boislow immediately.

The guards on patrol finally showed up.

Clarisse seemed mentally exhausted, so she was escorted to her room to rest. Eric was sent to look after her.

Becker and Boislow were tied up and surrounded by soldiers. They were sent to the dungeons by Evrard.

In the end--

Only Regis, Altina and Jerome were left in the dining hall.

"Let them cool their heads... Send them back to the capital after the escort officer's wounds heal... The disciplinary report against them will follow too."

"That's right!"

"Hah! Just kill them and be done with it."

"Sir Jerome, you are taking lives too lightly."

Jerome just shrugged Altina's comment off.

The smell of blood still lingered in the air.

Jerome took a bottle of red wine from the kitchen, pulled off the cork with his teeth and drank heartily.

"Fufufu... But the inspector's proposal isn't bad though. Everything will be solved if he made that false report."

"You are joking right?"

Altina looked at him coldly.

Jerome sneered coldly in response.

The old Jerome might agree with Becker's proposal.

Regis said gloomily:

"... In the imperial army, such bribery and injustice are rampant. Not many are as preposterous as him though."

Jerome didn't agree.

"That's mild compared to others... You guys didn't know?"

"... Well, I only knew things I read."

Altina banged the table with her right fist.

"Unforgivable!"

"... Calm down, princess... Instead of that, there are more important things that threaten the lives of everyone."

"Ah." Altina stared at her hand.

"Because I punched that guy?"

"... That's right. Even the escort officer was wounded, we can't count on a report backing us up even if we fail to take the fort."

"I would rather fight Latreille than bow down to that guy!"

Jerome smirked.

"Fufufu... Is that fine? Saying such things out loud?"

"Why? You want to snitch on me to the military department?"

"Good idea it might be refreshing for my annoying commander to disappear. But I am pissed off with that irritating 2nd prince."

Due to Jerome's situation and personality, even if he knew Altina had the intention to revolt, he would not sell her out. Regis did think this might happen...

Jerome had hidden his budget from the Military Department too.

On the grand scheme of things, both of them were on the same side right now.

But it was still too early for that.

Regis used a tone as calm as possible to explain.

"... We won't clash with the first army. Like I said, we don't have the forces for that."

"Well, what should we do?"

"There is no other way other than attacking Fort Volks."

"But even if we give it our all, it is meaningless if the report gets toned down!?"

Jerome laughed coldly:

"Fufufu... Show them we have been wiped out? If the soldiers that were deployed from the fort are all dead, the military department would have to acknowledge that we held nothing back."

"We can't do that!"

"Even I won't follow such an order-- What are your plans?"

Altina and Jerome stared at Regis.

There was no way to tell if it would work...

Even so, they had to do this.

"We attack Fort Volks. After seizing it, the Military department has to acknowledge us."

The two were dumbfounded.

Was it time for jokes! Before being shouted at, Regis started the next phase of explanation.

He displayed his research on the long table.

It was soaked and had the footprint of a huge man on it, but the paper was relatively intact.

"... Listen to me. That fort has the reputation of being invincible, but the number of troops stationed there must be small. The problem is the terrain and the countless cannons."

Altina leaned closer, her ruby like eyes almost reflecting Regis' face.

"Regis..."

"Erm... Princess... Not me, please look at the documents..."

"Are you being serious?"

"Do I look like I am giving up or acting insane?"

"Are you serious or not?"

"I would be really happy if you trusted me just now..."

Bang! Jerome slammed his hands onto the table and stared at the documents.

"Talk. I will listen. You are no different than trash in my eyes. But you are trash that can be used. I will judge from your explanation whether to throw you into the same cell as that pest inspector!"

"... I get it."

Jerome looked at Altina with an icy gaze.

"Princess, didn't you trust this strategist deeply?"

"But I can't just dump everything on him. I believe the Regis who thinks through things together with me."

"Fufufu... I see."

"I trust Sir Jerome too, especially your prowess with a lance."

"Hmmp, that's a given."

Jerome pushed Regis to go on.

Regis' sight fell onto the documents once again.

Chapter 3: Under My Flag

Regis was reading his book in the conference room.

"Good morning! You are up early."

Altina appeared while using her towel to wipe her neck.

"Ah, morning," Regis greeted in return.

"Should I say it’s early, or is it late..."

"Didn't you sleep?"

"There was something I needed to research."

"Is this it?"

Altina looked down at the book in his hands.

Regis scratched his head and said:

"No, I have finished my research... This is just an interesting book that is related."

"Same as usual~~. What kind of book is this?"

"It is about origins of flags and crests. For example..."

He flipped to the page with the empire's flag.

7 swords were displayed on top of a red backing.

She leaned on the table and moved closer, looking at the book.

"Ah, this one."

There was a similar flag in the conference room too.

Regis turned the page, it showed the same swords with a white base.

"It was like this in the past."

"It looked like a white flag."

"It wasn't changed because of that though"

"Hmmm~"

Altina reached over and flipped through the pages rapidly.

Regis looked between the book and her expression.

"... This is quite interesting right?"

"Yeah."

"By the way, when Sir Jerome took over command of the Beilschmidt border regiment, his family crest became its flag."

"Ah, that's right."

The banner hanging beside the empire's flag had a red base with a black lance and a lion.

That was the Beilschmidt Margrave's flag.

It was a command to fly the commander's family crest for the regiment. It was the same for Marquis Thénezay where Regis used to serve.

"It seems that they are all red."

"For the banners of the nobles, using the empire's base color is the norm. The church will use black and purple, the commoners will use green."

"Hmmm... What about blue and yellow?"

"Blue seemed unrelated to status... But it is the same color as the sky and the sea so its..."

"Ah, it will be hard to see."

"There are some who felt that it represents freedom this way."

"I see."

"Yellow is used in the Germania Federation, so it's not popular in the Belgaria empire."

"Ahaha... So red isn't popular over there?"

"They think bright red is a uncouth color, they seem to use dark brown though."

"Uncouth..."

Altina stroked her hair and frowned. Her hair was bright red.

Regis waved his hand.

"I don't think it is uncouth... Erm... I think it is beautiful."

"Eh?"

"Ah... Nothing..."

"Say it again, say it again."

"No no no..."

"Again, again."

"No way..."

A carriage left the southern gate through the falling snow.

After Sierck Fort was out of sight, it deviated from the road.

As it was making a wide turn, the wind picked up.

The driver took off the hat on her head, unveiling her crimson hair, which flowed with the wind.

"Phew..."

"Are you okay Altina?"

The girl driver nodded in response to Regis' query.

"Of course! You know right? I am an expert carriage driver."

"Well, I do know that... But you are only using one hand now."

She was told that a full recovery will take 3 months, so her left arm was still secured in a sling.

But her recovery was progressing well.

"Using one hand or foot doesn't matter if I said it is fine."

"... Just take it slow."

"I won't fail again!"

Altina deftly held the reins with just her right hand, controlling the speed of the horses.

They got in trouble before because a horse injured had its leg, so they were using two horses this time. It was an extravagant carriage that even had headlights which used oil lamps.

The insides were loaded with food and clothes; these were necessary items for negotiation.

Because they were off the road, the surface was uneven.

"Woah!?"

Regis almost fell off the driver's seat, grabbing on to his armrest for dear life.

"Wait, don't fall off."

"Then drive slower..."

"It's getting dark!"

"No, the place we arranged to meet is almost... Shya!?"

"You will spook the horses, stop screaming!"

The ride was so bumpy that it hurt Regis' butt, but they finally saw their destination.

A hill of withered grass covered by a thin layer of snow, there was a large tree there.

Altina drove the carriage towards a man, while 4 others stood some distance away. All of them wore clothes made from leather and feathers.

The empire called them barbarians, while Regis and the others addressed them as citizens of Bargainheim.

The one standing before them was Diethart.

Altina stopped the carriage and leapt off the driver's seat.

"Sorry for the wait! Long time no see!"

"Ugh."

Regis struggled to dismount.

"Hello... Sorry for making you wait."

"Ah, it's been a while, Mr. Strategist."

Deithart's face turned slightly red.

Altina slotted herself between them.

"I brought the food and clothes with me, please take it if it is to your liking."

"... I would like to hear the contents of the request before taking the remuneration."

"I'm not planning to loan it to you, just take it as a gift."

"So you are saying it has nothing to do with the things you want to request for?"

"Well, I will bring it back if you don't want it."

"I see... You are as stubborn as usual. I will gratefully accept this."

After bowing, The men started unloading the carriage on Diethart's instructions.

As that was going on, Altina spoke.

"Alright, it's cold here so let's get straight to the point."

"Yeah."

"We are planning to attack Fort Volks!"

Diethalt had a serious expression.

"... I am questioning your mental stability."

"If we don't carry out this order, we will be branded traitors. We might have to face the 1st army."

"As I thought, the empire is corrupted."

"That's why we have to fight... Regis will come up with a plan somehow."

Diethart looked over with eyes of disbelief.

Regis scratched his head.

"I don't have the confidence... But I will have to push forth forcefully."

"I see... There are such times too... You are telling me this because you want us to take part in the assault?"

Altina nodded.

"That's correct. But don't get me wrong, I don't mean charging at a fort that is full of cannons. It's the same for you and my people."

Diethart tilted his head.

The norm for attacking a fortified position is to attack with overwhelming force. Stepping over countless bodies to reach the walls, scaling it, fighting off the defending troops and suppressing the cannons and gates from the inside to achieve victory.

Diethart was basically following the same methodology when attacking Sierck Fort. They closed in under the cover of the blizzard to avoid the cannon fire and attacked.

"What's your plan, Mr. Strategist?"

"I have some ideas."

Regis looked at the men unloading the cargo.

He pondered for a moment.

"... This plan is very unorthodox... It will be better if less people knew about it. I can share it with Mr. Diethart alone though, would that be fine?"

It was Diethart's turn to ponder.

"For the roles my people will be playing, will there be a need to know the entire plan?"

"No."

"Hmmm... Then don't tell me. I don't think Mr. Strategist will send us into a trap at this juncture."

"But it will still be dangerous."

"I understand. My side owes you this much. And..."

"Hmmm?"

Diethart didn't continue.

He pressed Regis to go on with just the necessary details.

To be safe, Regis sought advice from Altina.

"Princess?"

"Since they agree, let's go with this."

"I understand--"

Regis summarized his information and briefed them to Diethart. The men who finished unloading looked at them from afar.

Regis told the plan in detail.

After listening carefully, Diethart nodded.

"... Understood... I will get it done."

"That's a big help!"

Diethart responded to Altina's extended right hand this time.

Regis shook his hand too.

"I am very grateful."

"In order to return the favor to the young princess, I swear to accomplish the task on my nation's honor. And... on my love for Mr. Strategist too."

"You mean love among friends and brothers right!?"

The strong youth smiled gently.

He then looked at Altina seriously and bowed.

The cape made from a lion fluttered in the wind, Diethart and his men disappeared into the snowy forest.

The Germania federation was large.

A coalition of 22 smaller kingdoms and Duchies.

But the rule of Chairman St. Prussia wasn't perfect, and civil wars broke out frequently among member states.

Varden Duchy belonged to this federation.

Since its formation, it's territory was threatened by its neighboring countries, especially the Bulgarian empire. But that changed with the construction of Fort Volks.

The budget needed for war fell drastically.

Thanks to the iron ore mines and the cut in needless expenses, the Duchy's economic situation was one of the better ones among the Federation.

Varden Duchy used the spare budget efficiently, hiring veteran mercenaries and top grade weapons to bolster its defense.

With the expansion of its national power, they started expanding into the forest occupied by the barbarians.

Holger was a wandering mercenary who signed up after hearing the benefits at Fort Volks were great.

He was going to be 28 this year.

He was hired 6 months ago. He might be a veteran as a mercenary, but he was just a rookie in Fort Volks and was treated like one.

He exited the Fort's main gate on his horse.

Several savages attack distress calls from the pioneers expanding into the forest were received. He headed out into the forest in order to exterminate the barbarians.

There were about 20 horsemen.

Only the leading rider was a knight of Varden Duchy, the rest were all mercenaries.

The breaths of the horses and men turned into white smog which trailed behind them, the snow was falling harder.

Holger cursed in his heart.

(Unacceptable... The savages are picking trouble on such a cold day... Why don't they just hibernate in the winter, how irritating.)

Holger had no love towards Varden Duchy, Fort Volks or the expanding lands.

Mercenaries only fight for themselves.

Chasing after savages who ran when chased was a thankless job.

They gradually approached the depth of the forest.

The 20 riders advanced in a single file.

Because of the withered branches and snow, the sun that was already covered by the clouds appeared dimmer.

According to reports, the barbarians escaped here. The horseman in front should be tracking the footprints of the savages.

The old war horse Holger was riding on suddenly left the ranks.

"Hey!"

He pulled in the reigns, returning the horse into position.

Don't give me more trouble! Holger felt uneasy as he swore.

(Did we pursue too deep?)

Holger looked at the knight leading the unit from the front.

It was hard to express his opinion with his position, but could he suggest a short break using his horse as an excuse? As he was considering this, an arrow flew out.

It hit the light shoulder armor of the knight, bouncing off with a metallic thud.

Ambush!?

As if the arrow was a cue, shuffling sounds erupted from the depth of the forest.

There were way more than 20 people.

The leading knight stopped his horse in a panic and screamed.

"Savages!?"

"Moron!! Don't stop!!"

Holger couldn't help but yell at his superior.

They were in a single file, so they couldn't retreat even if they stopped. They could only make a U-turn through the trees!

Thinking the same thing, the other mercenaries changed their directions and spread out.

They didn’t have the obligation to help the stupid knight.

They could only escape.

It was said that white flags were useless against barbarians. They believed the savages were pests, avengers driven by hate and devils abandoned by the gods.

Rumors said they will eat men alive or tear off limbs.

Holger wiped off the annoying sweat on his back.

The sound of footsteps could be heard from their retreat route.

"We are surrounded!"

Someone screamed in despair.

The mercenaries wanted to flee in another direction but were trapped. With no one taking command, they huddled up in a circle.

Even the horses held their breath in this unusual atmosphere.

Holger's band was already in the depths of hell.

The figures of the savages appeared.

Wearing the fur of beasts and wielding swords or axes, they made strange sounds to intimidate others. Why did the report say only a few of them were sighted? It was a massive group large enough to encircle them like a wall.

One of the mercenaries groaned:

"I heard these fellows would eat humans alive..."

"No, don't!"

One of the youth drew his short sword and put it to his throat. It was a sword he was proud of, sent to him by his parents back in his hometown on his 18th birthday.

He wanted to kill himself?

That might be better though... As he thought about that, Holger put his hand on the short sword and restrained the youth.

He didn't have any reason to do that.

There was no chance of survival.

The youth looked with questioning eyes at Holger, waiting for him to explain why he stilled the blade.

There was no reason after all.

What should he say?

Don't give up?

They can fight their way out if they stay alive?

Don't die before your seniors do?

All of these were shallow and lacked weight. Hawk didn't prepare the adequate lines in advance.

Holger drew his sword.

"Follow me!"

Even though the enemy outnumbered them, they were still 20 riders. If they all took up their lances and charged, there might be a chance for some of them to be saved...

A man dressed elegantly walked forward from the surrounding barbarians.

His cloak was made from the skin of a lion.

"How courageous. But there is a thousand of us here. I am warning you not to do anything rash."

He spoke fluent Germanian.

"The savage actually..."

"My name is Diethart. How about telling me your name?"

"Holger. Are you really savages? Or soldiers from another nation of Germania?"

"Neither... We are the warriors of the nation residing in this forest, Bargainheim.

I have never heard of such a country! Holger cursed.

"What do you plan to do with us? Will you eat us alive as rumored?"

“Dismount and throw your sword away. Answer our questions and we will release you in 2 months time..."

"What!?"

They didn't understand the reasons, but for the mercenaries who were prepared for death in such a desperate situation, this was a wonderful proposal that seemed to have dropped from Heaven.

They looked at each other.

The youth who was going to commit suicide leaped off his horse. He dropped the sword in his hand, went down on one knee and raised his hands to the sky.

"My god, please spare me!"

As the other mercenaries followed his lead, Holger stared at Diethart to the very last moment.

He had no other choice.

Holger's band was captured by the barbarians.

They were separated and their hands and legs were chained. A piece of cloth covered the tiny cave Holger was locked in.

He thought they would freeze him to death...

But they provided him with warm water and red hot rocks to keep him warm.

They really planned to keep their word.

At night, the crying sound of a youth came from one of the caves.

3 days later--

Holger was brought before Diethart alone.

His limbs were bound, and a sword was pointed at him.

But it was a miracle he was still alive.

Beside Diethart was a young man in Belgarian uniform.

A girl with crimson eyes was present too. Her mouth was masked so Hawk couldn't tell who she was, but she must be holding a high position if she was keeping her identity a secret.

Holger spat in his heart.

(Damn it... so the Belgarians were behind this.)

He was surrounded by barbarians holding spears.

A young man whose expression was too gentle for a soldier offered him a wooden chair.

"Please take a seat."

"Hmmp... I will die if I refuse right? I will sit."

Holger sat opposite the Belgarian soldier.

A wooden table was placed between them.

The young man spoke broken Germanian with a Belgarian accent:

"We don't want to kill you."

"You want me to trust the empire?"

"It is your freedom to choose..."

"Tch."

Holger waited for him to speak. When he was taken prisoner, Diethart mentioned he wanted answers for a few questions.

The young man nodded.

"My name is Regis."

"I am Holger."

"Well then, Mr. Holger, please look at this blueprint."

Spread out on the wooden table was a map detailing the passageway inside an architecture.

Was this the mines of some mountains?

Holger thought he would be enslaved and work in the mines, but he noticed something was wrong.

"This is... Fort Volks!?"

"There should be no major changes if you thought so. That's great."

"You, what are you planning with this..."

"Oh!? You know the value of this document?"

Regis smiled happily.

Holger stood up from his chair.

"The miniature map of the fort, what are you planning to do with it!?"

"Ara~ it took a lot of effort to get this. It was hard getting the Tuonvell mayor to show me his personal book collection... apart from this, there were books and records that were said to be lost during the war, the previous mayor was probably a bibliomaniac. Especially the book detailing research of medical herbs in the north was great... it is not only practical, its historical value is also..."

"Regis. Regis, you are going off topic."

The girl standing by behind the young man hit his shoulder.

Calling the soldier by name, she must be an important person.

Could she be a noble?

The young name claiming to be Regis sat on the chair properly.

"Pardon me."

"To dig out that blueprint... what are you scheming?"

"Obviously, it is for attacking the fort."

He said something unbelievable casually.

"Are you an idiot?!"

"That's right. I am forced to do some idiotic things... That's why your information is necessary. This blueprint was made 40 years ago, there must be some changes right? Where are the guards stationed? The ammunition cache? The quarters of the commander?"

"... Even if you know these, it would be meaningless if you can't reach Fort Volks."

"That is indeed so... That's why there is no harm in telling me right?"

"Just ask the other guys if I don't talk..."

"Wrong."

"Eh?"

"The plan from the very beginning was to interrogate all of you and compare your answers. But we can't release the people who lied. Only the honest ones will be released... You can't return to the Fort, so we will provide you with the necessary travel expenses as well as your sword and horse."

Holger groaned.

What he said was obvious, but he covered all the bases. His band was probably captured under this man's instruction.

"Is it true that you will release us?"

"I can only ask you to trust me... I promise to release you 2 months later."

Holger stared at him.

Regis looked back with a serious expression.

Diethart and the woman behind him were waiting for Holger's answer.

He could feel the tension of the barbarians around him rising.

Will he be slaughtered immediately if he refuses?

He didn't plan to test it.

"I understand... I will tell you everything... So please let the others go. They are all great guys."

"... I understand. I will compare what you said with the others. If everything is correct, everyone will be released."

"You will definitely do that right?"

"I swear to God."

Regis crossed his arms before his chest.

There was one common religion spreading between the Belgarian empire and the Germanian Federation, and they worship the same god.

Even though they fight each other during battles, their religious values were the same.

Diethart placed his finger on the blueprint and said:

"This is the main gate. There is one sentry posted here."

"... Okay."

Regis took out his pen and noted it down.

(Even if I tell him these, it is impossible for him to make it through the countless cannons... What is this man thinking?)

Regis travelled to the forest of the savages for the entire week.

Altina was curious about what he was doing and followed on the first day. But going into the middle of the barbarian tribes without any escorts was normally unacceptable.

Evrard will definitely question him with a fauchard if word leaked out, so Regis went to gather information by himself from the 2nd day onwards.

He asked Eric to help him drive the carriage since Regis couldn't ride a horse.

After questioning all the prisoners, he completed a rather trustworthy map of Fort Volks.

As the sun was setting--

Regis returned to his room, leaving the completed documents on the table and collapsed onto his bed.

The red light was weak and the room started to dim.

"So tired..."

He fell into deep slumber--

The door to the room was knocked furiously.

"Hey Regis!"

"Ah, Sir Jerome?"

As he pushed himself up, the door was opened.

Something similar happened before... For example, what should be done if let's say he was changing?

Jerome was wearing his uniform properly for once.

"Why you, what is up with this!?"

"Ugh...?"

Regis rubbed his eyes.

The dazzling light shone down from the sky window.

"But it was night just now..."

"Are you still sleeping! Careful that I wring your neck, you trash!"

"Ah, yes, sorry."

Regis totally lost consciousness, he didn't even dream.

From how bright it was, it should be time for breakfast.

He shifted his eyes onto the item Jerome shoved in his face.

It's an invoice.

It listed the items that were purchased from vendors.

It was a sizeable amount of money.

"... Fort Volks isn't that far away, but there are many things needed to attack it."

"Are the 30 large cannons really necessary!?"

"Didn't I mention that we need to buy them?"

"I know you are buying them, but who knew it would be so many! Are you planning to build another fort before Fort Volks!?"

"Ah, that would be interesting... But the ones I purchased are mobile medium sized cannons. Because there were only 8 cannons in Century Fort..."

"That is more than enough!"

"After estimation, including possibility of breakdowns, this amount is necessary."

"Where is the money coming from!?"

"Eh? From... The Margrave's clan..."

"So it is my money!"

"That was the empire's budget anyway. It was covered up through the accounting books... If we don't use it now, there might not be a next time right?"

"Tch."

Jerome understood but he still looked furious.

Regis got up from bed, dusting off the uniform he was already wearing, making himself more presentable.

"Since the invoice is here, it means the goods have arrived?"

"Ah."

"My apologies... I'm troubling the general with the duties of a servant..."

"Really. If you woke up in the morning, I wouldn't have needed to rush here."

"Why not just send someone..."

Jerome glared at him.

Regis shrugged.

"... Well, it's not something you can say before the troops."

"That's it. Anyway, this is your fault for getting up late. Not even nobles sleep as late as you."

"You are right... My body feels heavy so..."

"Because you lack training."

"Ugh..."

He couldn’t deny that.

Jerome, Altina and the other soldiers all trained diligently from the early morning.

Was his stamina really that bad? Regis thought as he took a step.

He failed.

"Huh?"

He wanted to move towards the door, but the bed frame was getting closer.

He was on the verge of colliding with it!

As he was thinking that, a strong force grabbed his body.

"What are you doing!?"

Regis noticed that Jerome was holding him from behind with one hand. Just before he fell.

"... Ah... Thank you... Cough."

"Hey? What's the matter with you!?"

"Ah it's nothing, I just slipped..."

"Moron. You are burning up!"

"?"

Jerome supported Regis' back and put a hand on his forehead.

What tough and thick hands.

"It's a fever."

"Ah..."

He was feeling lightheaded, his mind was muddled and his feet didn’t seem to be touching the ground. This wasn't because he just woke up.

Jerome seemed to wear a worried expression. Regis thought he wouldn't care about his subordinate's well being... Maybe this was the reason behind his popularity.

"Tch... What a weakling! At this busiest period!"

"... I am sorry."

"Just sleep."

"Right."

As they spoke, some girls showed up from the open doors. Altina was surprised to see Regis being held by Jerome.

"What happened?"

Clarisse asked quietly.

"...Are you kissing?"

"Stop kidding! Why would I kiss this trash!?"

Jerome was blushing. It wasn't a blush from embarrassment, but anger.

Regis was tossed onto the bed.

Altina rushed over.

"What happened!? You look unwell."

"Ah... you caught a cold..."

"!?"

Her white hand was caressing his forehead. The cool sensation was soothing.

And it's so soft.

Regis remembered the incident of holding her hand and his heart raced.

"You are so hot, your face too. Are you okay!?"

"... I might not make it."

"Don't give up! Do you need anything?"

"Sorry... a glass of water..."

"Yes, immediately. Anything else? Are you hungry?"

"Thank you... bread or anything would be fine..."

"That's enough?"

"How about..."

"I won't buy books for you alright?"

Regis shut his open mouth. Altina looked at him with disgust.

Jerome instructed Clarisse:

"Prepare some water and food for him. I will get the doctor."

"...!?"

Clarisse looked surprised.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"... I didn't expect you to be so gentle."

"What!? Don't say nonsense, this is the same as repairing a broken blade. Regis is trash, but seemed to be of use. I will use things even if it is trash, that's all to it."

"... Is that so."

Clarisse bowed expressionlessly and headed for the dining hall. Although she was always joking with Regis and Altina, she was unbelievably cold towards others. This was the first time Regis saw her conversing with Jerome.

Jerome glared at Regis, his face filled with the phrase 'it can't be helped'.

"Recover in one day, or die."

"... I will try my best."

Altina brought a blanket to cover Regis.

"Does it feel cold? Need more blankets?"

"Thank you, I am fine..."

"You are in no condition to work, so rest here quietly."

"That's correct... Ah right, Altina."

"What is it?"

She leaned closer.

"Please help me with the payment to the vendors. The money is already prepared in the vault. Let Sir Evrard count the stores."

"Ah... Yes."

"Also..."

"Yes! What is it!"

"... I can infect you with my illness, so don't come into this room anymore."

"Ugu~~~"

Altina pouted as she nodded.

The lady doctor took his pulse rate and temperature.

It was a little embarrassing because she wasn't using equipment, but her bare hands.

"Hmmm... it's exhaustion from being overworked."

"... Is that so."

"Rest well today, and tomorrow too if possible."

"No, the goods are here, if I don't tell them the sequence for them to get accustomed to..."

He was glared at.

"Mr. Strategist, exhaustion starts from the feeling that your stomach can’t bear it. It won't recover even if you eat properly. Next will be heart problems. You might think things are fine one day, but the next morning you may become a cold corpse, such things do happen alright?"

"Ugh..."

"Well, people who will rest obediently after listening to this won't contact such a disease... I have already prepared the medicine."

"If it could be cured with medicine, that would be great."

The lady doctor made a gesture, and Evrard entered the room. The burly bald man made the room feel smaller with his presence.

"Wahaha! How pitiful to be tired out! You lack spirit! Spirit!"

He made a swinging motion in the room.

The lady doctor blinked.

"I leave the rest to you, Sir Knight commander."

"Yes! Leave Sir Regis to me!"

"Fufufu..."

Regis stared blankly, not knowing what was happening.

"Eh? What is going on...?"

"Sir Regis's body is tied to the fate of the goddess!"

The goddess Evrard was referring to was Altina. It seemed to stem from a local belief.

"That means! Letting Sir Regis sleep well to cure him of his illness is my way of expressing fealty! It's my duty!!"

"Eh eh!?"

"Come, sleep at ease! Do you need a lullaby?"

"No, no thanks!"

The lady doctor exited the room.

"With the series of training going on, injury rate among the troops are high. I'm busy, so that's it for today. Sir knight commander, please ensure Mr. Strategist sleeps until morning."

"I will take care of it!"

"Huh~~"

Evrard stood at the entrance and stared at him.

Regis sighed.

"Erm... I understand. I will sleep... Sir Edward is busy with training too right?"

"Don't worry, Eric is covering for me. I won't let up even when I'm dealing the final blow to the enemy, so I will be fine. Or rather, I will be more careful when the foe surrenders. I lived this long thanks to being careful."

"... So that's how it is."

Just like a warrior riding on the foremost front alongside his grandson. The way he spoke was as interesting as telling a tale.

It would be great if Regis could listen to him go on, but Evrard would start singing lullabies if he continued--that's how Evrard looked.

Regis gave up and closed his eyes.

"Hah... The things I must do are piled sky high."

There wasn't much time left before the February 12th deadline.

Only the feeling of frustration was spreading.

The stories he had read spun in his head.

His body finally sunk into deep slumber after his exhaustion reached the limit.

"Hmmm...?"

"Ara."

After opening his eyes, he saw Clarisse standing in the dull red light.

"... Is this... A dream?"

"If you dream of someone, it means that person is thinking about you."

"... Ah, I read a poem like that once."

"Which means my thoughts have been successfully transmitted; I am so happy."

"... This is not a dream, I think I am awake."

"You lack dreams, sir Regis."

Clarisse shrugged. She wasn't smiling, but her expression seemed to suggest that her mood was great.

"Did you bring me water?"

"Doing this reminds me of my time in the capital."

"Hmm? You needed to take care of your family? Ah, sorry... I am asking a very personal matter."

"Fufufu... No. It was the flower I planted."

"Am I a flower vase?"

"Please bloom a flower to make me happy someday."

"As if I can do that..."

"If it's Sir Regis, it definitely can be done."

As usual, she was trusting without basis.

Regis surveyed the room.

"Sir Evrard isn't here?"

"He dropped by every now and then... 'He is more quiet than a corpse, he must be sleeping. He might be dead', that's what he said."

"Hahaha..."

"This is no laughing matter. The princess is worried."

"Is that so?"

"But she didn't visit because of Sir Regis' instructions, so she sent me."

He did tell Altina that while he was dizzy with the fever.

"She is unexpectedly obedient."

"What are you saying, Sir Regis. The princess follows your every word."

"Well, that's true..."

Be it setting the empress as her goal, or proposing the duel, all of this was because of Regis' words. It might just be a whim in her heart.

Messing up the body she relied on so much, he felt apologetic towards her.

"How is your body’s condition?"

"... I am almost well."

"Ara, what a shame."

"Eh?"

“I was monopolizing Sir Regis' sleeping face just now."

“What... What!? What are you saying...!?"

"Fufufu... But it is better talking to Sir Regis who is awake. I will bring something to eat later, please rest a while more."

"That's right. Since I am like this, I should prioritize recovering my body."

"Yes."

Regis took some water from Clarisse to wet his throat.

It seemed to be absorbed like dry sand, making Regis realize how much he needed this. It might be because he was coughing earlier, his throat was sore.

Clarisse took away the candle stand, which was the only light source in the room.

"Please rest well until morning."

"Really... Am I that untrustworthy?"

"Fufufu... I believe, I trust that Sir Regis will read books when he has the energy."

"Ugh-- Erm."

Guilty as charged.

If there was moonlight, he would read even without a candle light.

In the dim crimson light, Clarisse looked at Regis with a face of worry.

"... Sir Regis... Please don't die."

"Ah... Yeah..."

The fated day was finally here.

3000 soldiers formed up in the parade square of Sierck Fort.

2000 of them will be taking part in the campaign, the other 1000 will stay behind to hold the fort.

They formed an alliance with the most influential nation among the barbarians, Bargainheim, so their target was no other than the Germania Federation.

In other words, there should be no reason for them to leave so many troops in defense...

Regis hadn't figured out the true intentions of the 2nd prince Latreille. If the goal was to just weaken the regiment, Sierck Fort should be safe.

But if he was plotting the fall of Altina, or going after her life, the timeline for the attack might have been leaked to the enemy.

The enemy might even make a run for Sierck Fort after they proceeded with their campaign. The regiment would be finished if their base gets taken.

There might be the possibility of the campaign group being attacked from behind too.

The thousand men left behind would also act as the reserves forces if the main force was pressed into a desperate situation.

According to the records, 2000 men was the smallest expedition force sent to attack Fort Volks. The wagons might be transporting 30 cannons, but that's only on the same level as the 4th expedition.

The parade square was filled with the scent of the horses that were pulling the wagons of supplies.

Evrard and Eric came to Regis who was watching the formation of the soldiers from a corner.

Both of them were in full armor, holding a halberd and sword respectively. Standing side by side, they looked totally different.

"The day has finally come!"

"Thank you for your hard work, Sir Regis."

"... Hard work... Yes, it's finally time."

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I have made a full recovery."

"But you still looked tired."

"Hahaha..."

Evrard beat his chest.

"Leave the defense to me! I will wait for your good news!"

"Alright, we are counting on you."

The defense of Sierck Fort was left in Jerome's right hand man.

If there wasn't anyone with the ability to command in the fort, the troops might surrender on their own in the event of enemy attacks. Compared to the numbers in the fort, who will take command was more important.

Regis planned to let Eric stay too, but Eric insisted on protecting Regis, so Regis had to let him join the expedition group.

Altina's left hand was still injured, so it was great for the main force to have a reliable knight.

The 2 of them returned back to formation.

Jerome came over next.

"Hey Regis."

"What's the matter?"

"I want to ask you something."

Jerome looked to his left and right.

This place was some distance from the troops and no one was near them.

"I will do my best to answer..."

"How do you address the princess?"

"Eh? Just... 'your highness'."

"So what is it with Altina?"

"...Huh!?"

Regis petrified.

When did he hear that?

Jerome squinted.

"So I didn't mishear that. So you are actually a grand noble? I always thought you were too knowledgeable for a commoner."

"Please don't tease me. Even my great grandfather was a commoner. I even owe the military academy my scholarship fees."

"You didn't clear that?"

"I would had cleared it if I stayed in Marquis Thénezay's regiment for 3 years..."

"Hmmp, then why can a guy like you address the princess by her nickname?"

"I want to know too."

"You are close with the maid too."

"Erm... Not really, Ms Clarisse just likes to toy with me..."

Jerome's expression worsened.

"I mean Elin."

"Eh!?"

"You thought I was referring to the princess' maid? Does the book tell you how to flirt too?"

"Hahaha... Impossible. Elin was just passionate about working for Sir Jerome. I have no luck with women."

Jerome looked at Regis as if he was an idiot.

"... Forget about the maids... Is your relationship with the princess the same?"

"Just a commander and strategist. Because of her personality, she allowed me to address her by her nickname on a whim."

"That's fine then."

It was Regis' turn to feel uneasy.

"Could it be... Sir Jerome you... towards Altina...?

"Even if it is the strategist, having a scandal with a commoner would affect morals. Don't cause trouble because of nonsense like that, you trash."

"That's, that's correct..."

A scandal like this would be an obstacle in her path.

He needs to be careful of his interactions with her.

And Altina herself showed up in front of the formation.

Her cloak still covered her left side. Since this was a campaign, she wore armor over her dress.

She stood at the podium.

The soldiers stood at attention waiting for her speech.

"Everybody~ How are you feeling~!?

"Warrgghhh~~!!"

In response to Altina's clear voice, the troops shouted in response. It was so loud it seemed like an earthquake.

Jerome's face was bitter. "What is this 'everybody, how are you feeling', is this a field trip!?"

But he said it softly so the soldiers wouldn't hear.

Regis shrugged.

"That's Altina's style... What do you usually say, Sir Jerome?"

"Something like... 'You guys ready? Let's kill the enemy, or die trying!'"

"... A rather crude speech."

Altina shouted out loudly once again.

"Now! We are going to attack Fort Volks! You must have heard the reason for this too!"

"If we don't take the fort, we will be branded traitors. But I feel that that is too strange a reason to fight!"

Jerome squinted his eyes and said.

"Hey... What is she saying? Was it your idea?"

"My original proposal was 'In order to bring lasting peace to the borders, we are attacking Fort Volks. The plans are sound, please lend me your strength.' Something with that feel..."

"What a dull speech."

"But it's adequate right?"

Altina continued her speech.

"I don't want to fight just for myself, but for everyone! Those with family should think about them! Your lovers! Friends! And look at everyone around you! Your comrades are right besides you!"

The troops looked to their sides.

Their comrades.

For the soldiers, the one besides them were their battle brothers.

"We are fighting for our comrades! Our victory is for the people important to us! Don't forget that!"

Altina pulled a cloth out from the cloak that hid her the left side of her body. It was a green cloth.

Regis taught her that green was the color of the commoners.

"I want to protect the citizens! I won't ever forget that no matter what battles I face! I hope everyone will do the same!"

The soldiers started to get rowdy.

Jerome said with contempt:

"Is she a moron? You fight for yourself, that's a given right!?"

"... I agree with her... But I didn't expect her to say this here."

"She didn't even discuss this with you?"

"Altina will only consult me when she feels perplexed... But when she feels she is right, she will do it no matter who objects. That's the kind of child she is."

"Tch... You look so damn pleased!"

"Huh? That's how I looked...? This is bad."

Regis watched Altina speaking on the podium and squinted.

Her voice was booming.

"The shield of the citizens-- That's my banner! I will fight with this flag flying high! I hope everyone will lend me their strength!!"

Altina shouted with all her might.

The troops were silent.

The parade square was devoid of sound.

Their tension was high.

The longer one was in the army, the more lost they felt hearing this words. In the empire, wars were instigated by the lords, and it's something that soldiers fought in for rewards.

The result was that their wages supported their family... But few realized this point.

The lords weren't interested in why soldiers fought. This was common.

The commander asking for them to fight for the citizens was something they would never imagine. That's why the soldiers were lost.

A young soldier raised his fist to the sky.

"Long live Marie Quatre!!"

Some distance away, another soldier raised his sword.

"The citizen's shield!"

"For our family!"

They all expressed support for the speech.

Noise erupted from all corners. They were all in agreement.

The troops whose eyes were filled with ambition and killing intent shone with another light. It was the will to fight for someone.

Their families back home, their lovers, friends. And their comrades beside them. The faces of people important to them.

Some even wept when they remembered their kin far away.

Evrard and Eric both grunted in approval.

Jerome silently watched the soldiers' cheer.

Regis was once again in awe of Altina's strong resolve and ambition.

Year of the empire 851 February 12th—

300 cavalry, 600 artillery troops, 1100 infantry, a total of 2000 men of the Beilschmidt border regiment set out from Sierck Fort.

Chapter 4: The Fifth Campaign against Fort Volks

The commander of Fort Volks had been posted here for the past twelve years.

General Weingartner was that commander, a veteran 55 years of age.

Since being promoted to chief of staff at the age of 43, he had engaged the Belgaria empire and the neighboring nations of Germania in numerous battles, achieving victory each time.

Under his skilful command, casualties were minimal. He earned the deep trust of the Duke and soldiers.

His hair was all white, and he looked 60 based on his appearance. Because of his attention to detail, he got up every morning at the same time, had the same breakfast, did the same inspection, and trained the same way. The timing for these actions were known to be more precise than a clock.

He got up 15 minutes early one day, making the maids panic as they thought they overslept and the chef apologizing for being late.

From that day, even if Weingartner would only get out of bed when the hands of the clock hit 5am, even when he woke up earlier.

But his daily routine was changed by a report.

"The imperial army is attacking from the south!"

Fort Volks was filled with tension and excitement.

Many of the soldiers were boastful and arrogant because of the Fort's solid record, but the strength of the Belgarian empire was renowned.

If it mustered its troops from the various battlefronts, they would exceed 100,000 easily.

The preliminary reports indicated 2000 enemy troops, but from past experiences, no one in the command headquarters thought that this would be the entire force.

The flag of the Varden Duchy hung from the plain white wall, in a simple room with just a single long black table.

In this battle conference room, Weingartner and his 7 staff held a meeting.

The new chief of staff read the report again.

"-- We will probably see the Imperial army tomorrow."

The young general stood up and said:

"Our Fort Volks is invincible! We will send them flying back home!"

"That's right!"

"No matter how many thousands of soldiers the empire might send, they won't take a single step into our Fort Volks!"

Everyone was in high spirits too.

But Weingartner crossed his arms in silence.

He simply listened to his staff conversing.

After a while, he spoke:

"There were no reports of the imperial army mustering their forces. We didn't receive any intelligence about a massive overhaul in Fort Sierck too. From the scale of the Fort, it's impossible to raise an army over 10,000 in numbers. From the looks of things, there must be some issues in the empire. Probably something to do with the royals and nobles... We can't be careless... But there's no need to panic."

So that's how it was. The staff members nodded in agreement.

They felt uneasy because a strong nation was attacking, making them spout agitated words. But the old general calmed them down with his speech.

The chief of staff asked.

"Commander, what should we do?"

"First, we need accurate intelligence of our opponent."

"Understood. I will dispatch a reconnaissance team. We will get a clearer picture in an hour."

"I leave it in your hands."

The chief of staff gave his instructions to his subordinate standing by behind him.

The others staff expressed their views.

"Conduct the inspection of the cannons that were scheduled for next week now."

"That's right."

"I will prepare the men for battle."

"I will check the walls."

With their roles assigned, the staff went about their task.

As the members started to take action, Weingartner asked one of the staff:

"What happened to the cavalry unit that went out a few days ago?"

"... There is still no news. They were probably attacked by the savages. We sent out a 500 men group to search for them twice, but we can't locate their bodies."

"Is that so... It's regrettable, we will send their families our condolences along with the death notice and the entitled payout."

"Yes sir!"

The staff stood at attention and saluted.

He pivoted on his heel to turn right and jogged out of the conference room.

Weingartner was left alone.

"..."

News of general Jerome losing the duel at the end of last year and the 4th princess gaining actual command had reached his ears.

The black knight might be tough, but he was still the Margrave of the nation, there was no way he would point his blade at royalty. Things made sense when he thought about it that way.

Next would be this campaign.

Were the young and naive princess' ambitions driving this?

Or was it something else?

No matter the reason, he didn't think this campaign was better prepared than any previous attack he faced.

Weingartner got up from his seat and went to the dining hall as usual. The chefs served his meal as usual too.

--The next afternoon--

The chief of staff in charge of reconnaissance charged into the conference room.

"The imperial army is here!"

"That's slower than expected."

"That's because they positioned the cannons in the forest..."

An explosion boomed at this very moment.

Weingartner frowned.

He exited the conference room, passing through the cavern like passageway. He came to the observation deck made by digging through the outer walls.

He watched through the crack of the boulders and surveyed the plains south of the fort.

It was a forest that had withered in the winter.

Because it was used for military training, it was now a barren land with almost no greenery.

The imperial army could be seen right outside the forest.

It was 42Ar (3km) away from the outer walls off the fort.

Fort Volks' cannons were the latest version purchased from High Britannia. With the advantage of being on higher grounds, it's range was much further.

But even so, that place was just out of range.

According to scouting reports, the imperial army seemed to have prepared medium sized cannons.

The range was said to be 28Ar (2km). Both parties couldn't hit each other from this range.

"The bastards from the empire... What are they thinking, setting up their cannons at such a distance?"

They fired another round.

White smoke came out of the cannon, and an explosion could be heard shortly after.

"Misfire?"

None of the staff could answer this question.

The other cannons emitted white smoke too.

Explosions boomed once again.

The explosion was quite a distance from the fort.

Weingartner frowned.

"Did the reconnaissance team see anything else? Just cavalry, infantry and cannons?"

"Yes! There were huge amounts of food and supplies too."

"Supplies?"

"We confirmed a large amount of crates and large tents."

"Are they planning a long campaign?"

"That seems to be so!"

The staff felt uneasy over the unfathomable actions of the imperial army.

Weingartner fell into deep thought.

"... With their cannons, it's hard to draw near to scout them. Increase the men on the observation deck; be wary of night raids."

"Yes sir!"

"Also, send scouts to Sierck Fort periodically. They might be planning for the advance party to stall for time while they plan a massive reinforcement."

"So, so that's it!"

The unknown was scary.

With the strange movement of the imperial army, the possibility raised by Weingartner was taken to be the only answer.

Setting up a base right before the fort while mustering their strength there. They were certain it was a strategy the formidable empire would adopt.

On the flip side, this meant that they were thinking optimistically that 'Fort Volks won't fall unless the opponents send an unbelievably huge army.'

"If the empire is planning a large reinforcement, we need to defeat the advance party before they link up with the main force. There might be a need to leave the fort for battle, make preparations."

"Yes sir!"

The staffs closed their feet in attention and saluted in response to Weingartner's command.

That was the first day.

On the third day of the battle--

The cannon fired nonstop throughout the night and day.

They couldn't hit their targets, but the explosions could still be heard.

The earth was also trembling.

The faces of the staff looked frail.

"Some of the troops reported insomnia and feeling ill. There were also concerns that the tremors might cause the mines to collapse."

Weingartner shook his head and said:

"What nonsense, the mines were excavated by dynamites in the past, the caves wouldn't collapse with just this amount of shock... And the walls were actually hit by cannons in previous battles. How would cannon fires that couldn't even hit us cause it to collapse. Shut the mouths of those saying such nonsense. If they want to protest, throw them into the dungeons."

"Yes sir!"

The staff who held that view remained silent.

A different staff stood up.

"The scouts had returned from Sierck Fort. There is no signs of major reinforcements... Yet."

"Continue the reconnaissance."

"Yes sir!"

"Commander, let's attack! The opponents are just 2000 strong! We have more than 4000 troops! We will definitely emerge the victor in an open plain battle!"

"... They have the black knight."

"What can one man do!?"

This hot blooded young man was named Zechmeister.

20 years of age, a youth with curly brown hair. His eyes were deep black. He possessed the ability that matched his strong body and tough face.

In a skirmish with the neighboring nation of Beyerberg and was complimented by the Duke.

Weingartner squinted his eyes.

"I took part of the battle of Erstein... That was a joint campaign by the kingdom of St. Prussia, Kingdom of Sturmgart and us, the Duchy of Varden. The total force number 20,000 men, with a heavy cavalry vanguard 3,000 strong."

"I know but..."

"Then you should know he is not someone to be trifled with. The heavy cavalry was shattered by black knight Jerome and his 500 riders, and that campaign ended in failure."

"But commander! We the green bronze knights are different from the useless St. Prussia heavy cavalry! And we have the silver lances bestowed to us by the Duke!"

The newly developed metal shipped in from high Britannia was evaluated to be as good as fairy silver.

Only royalties, generals and people related to the Belgaria empire possessed fairy silver weapons, so it was not tested against it yet. But there was no doubt the new metal was better than normal weapons.

Zechmeister was bestowed with 100 of these lances which were equipped by his subordinates.

Even Weingartner wondered if the achievements of the black knight were thanks to his powerful lance 'Le Cheveu D'une Dame'.

But the cautious old general shook his head.

"The empire's cannons won't reach us and the outer walls are unharmed. It is meaningless to leave the fort. Isn't that the enemies' ploy?"

"That, that is..."

"Zechmeister, sharpen the lance bestowed to you by the Duke. It would be put to use soon."

"..."

The youth lowered his gaze.

'He is too young', Weingartner thought as he sighed.

The shelling continued through the 3rd night.

The morning of the 4th day--

With the constant bombardment, even Weingartner couldn't keep to his sleep routine.

'Just lie down and rest even if you cannot sleep', Weingartner had told his soldiers. So he still laid down and rested even though he couldn't catch a wink.

The door was knocked loudly.

"Commander!"

"What happened?"

"The green bronze knights have moved out!"

"!?"

Weingartner jumped out of bed. He was still wearing his uniform, and he knew he wouldn't have time to change in an emergency.

He opened the door without stopping and headed straight into the conference room to hear the report.

Half of the staff were gathered at the observation deck.

And of course, Zechmeister wasn't there.

The chief of staff pointed through the cracks of the boulders.

"They are clashing now!"

"Why did it turn out this way..."

Weingartner could only pray, hoping the green bronze knights could defeat the black knight Jerome.

The cavalry charged through the cannon fire and survived the shots of the muskets. Zechmeister led the 500 green bronze knights and closed in on the imperial army.

"Wargghh--!!"

They were about 10Ar (715m) from the annoying cannons.

The black knight appeared there. Their opponents were 300 horsemen.

He said in Belgarian:

"Hmmp... I was just getting bored. Do your best to entertain me, moles of the Duchy!"

Because Fort Volks was originally a mine, so moles were used to describe those dwelling in that fort.

Zechmeister knew that too.

He retorted in Germanian:

"Hmmp! The black knight is just a rusty lance that basks in its past glory! I will take you down with my silver lance!"

"A mole out of its hole is worse than rats."

"Shut your trap!"

Zechmeister spurred his horse on.

He charged.

The green bronze knights of the Varden Duchy and the knights led by Jerome clashed in battle.

Urging his horse forward, Zechmeister lunged his lance made from new metal.

Black knight Jerome blocked the blow with his silver lance 'Dame's Hair'.

"Huh. Is that lance just good for its color?"

"Stop your nonsense! You are at your limits with just defending!"

Zechmeister didn't give his opponent any chance to fight back, attacking consecutively.

Jerome might be skillful with his lance, but the new metal was said to be able to rival the fairy metal lance that could shatter normal weapons.

'I have the edge in terms of ability', Zechmeister judged.

He had the advantage!

His foe was barely able to keep up with defense.

"I can win! I can defeat the black knight!"

"Kukuku... This seems to be a new type of lance. I thought it might be something special... But it's hard to judge if the user is only at this level. I will pick it up for further research."

"What!?"

"Hah!"

In response to Zechmeister thrust attack, Jerome lunged strongly with his lance.

Zechmeister's lance was deflected away wildly.

It almost flew out of his hands.

Zechmeister held on to his weapon, but he showed a gap-- the tables had turned.

"Haaah!!"

"Uguoohh--!?"

Attacks too fast for the eyes to see were sent out repeatedly.

Zechmeister held his breathing as he dodged and blocked with his lance. But a glancing blow still landed on his shoulder and neck.

How is this humanly possible!?

A chill was sent down his spine.

Death was closing in on him.

Each of Jerome's attacks were heavy enough to numb Zechmeister's hands; they were as fast as bullets and impossible to read.

He followed the lance closely with his eyes and managed to fend it off. The blow could be felt throughout his body, making Zechmeister think his hands were going to break.

He couldn’t find a chance to counter.

"Kukuku... Quite impressive. Could you keep up if I go faster?"

"Stop your arrogant lies!"

Jerome should be using his full strength.

Zechmeister only noticed when he felt a warmth spreading from his left arm.

"Shyaa... Ah...!"

Jerome’s lance had stabbed him in the arm.

Zechmeister struggled to thrust his lance, attempting to push his foe away.

"Hmmp, useless scum. If you don't watch the opponent when aiming..."

The thrust was dodged and Zechmeister couldn't create any distance.

The lance in his left arm was pulled back and struck again.

Zechmeister couldn't defend.

He twisted his body but his flank was still hit.

"Uguuuu--!!"

With the rider slumping down, the horse understood it had lost and fled. The green bronze knights retreated in a panic too.

Jerome lifted one hand, restraining his knights from pursuing.

"The cannonballs will come flying if we get any closer! Fall back!"

The black knights retreated.

And the bombardment that wouldn't hit started again.

When his horses returned to Fort Volks, Zechmeister body was already cold.

Weingartner and the staffs received his body with a pained expression at the main gate.

The green bronze knights carefully lowered Zechmeister from his horse and laid him onto a bed.

The youth that failed to become a hero would never open his eyes again.

Weingartner had been on the battlefield before Zechmeister was even born.

But he still couldn't get used to death.

He pressed his temples and offered a silent prayer.

Sometime later--

Weingartner ordered the body to be send to Jenkin's family with full honors.

He looked towards the main gate absent mindedly

The gate was closed, so he couldn't see the imperial army.

"... The bombardment stopped."

He mumbled.

The chief of staff tilted his head.

"Did they finally exhaust their ammunition?"

"No, it should begin again shortly. They started firing immediately from the very beginning, they only stopped now. This is probably a moment of silence for the dead."

"Eh!? No, that... Indeed..."

When a general fell in battle and the horse ferried the body back, it was normal to offer prayers on the grounds of religion.

But how could the Belgarians know their enemies so well with the gate closed?

"From what I know about Jerome, he is not interested in such matters. Could it be the instructions of the new commander, 4th princess Marie Quatre..."

"It does seem like something royals who like grand ceremonies would take note of."

"I did think it was preposterous for a 14 year old girl to be a commander... But she might be better at war than expected. But in that case... What's the reason behind the bombardment that won't reach?"

"So it is indeed a ploy for us to rush out impatiently like Zechmeister?"

"That might be so. Ban all units from attacking without orders. Convey this command to everyone."

"Yes sir!"

The chief of staff answered with a salute.

The 7th day of the battle.

The chief of staff reported at noon.

"The reinforcements from the capital would arrive tomorrow morning. We would then be able to repel the enemies."

"Hmm."

Moving troops from the capital to the fort would only take 2 days, it had been several days since these enemies showed up. Weingartner thought the capital was taking things too lightly.

"There have been no casualties, but a lot of the men complained they couldn't sleep because of the cannons. There is a line before the infirmary right now."

"Please do what you can about this."

"Yes! Recently, the soldiers had the illusion of hearing sounds besides cannon fire."

"They kept hearing things?"

The chief of staff nodded.

Weingartner bended his head to the side and said:

"I didn't feel anything at all... Did a lot of the men have this problem?"

"Several of the troops residing on the first level seemed to be hearing things. Maybe the impact from the bombardment is too strong."

"When doing my rounds, I felt the higher levels to be shaking harder though."

Something felt off.

A force too small to attack a fort.

And the lack of intention of their foes in bolstering their forces.

The nonstop cannon fire that couldn't hit its target.

Food and crates with unknown purpose. Large tents.

The riders that disappeared in the barbarian's forest might be connected to this.

And the men on the first floor hearing things beside cannon fire.

Sound.

Weingartner stared at his feet.

"... Could it be..."

"What's the matter?"

"Chief of staff, gather the men. The floor of the armory--"

An exceptionally large tremor shook Fort Volks.

Several of the staff couldn't stand and fell onto their knees.

Weingartner charged out.

"Gather the men! From underground! The enemy must be coming in through the armory!"

"General!"

None of the staff understood these words immediately.

From the conference room situated at a height of 100Co (44m), Weingartner climbed down the numerous slopes and stairs.

Along the way, his vision was obscured by white smoke.

It smelled of smoke.

There were sounds of swords clashing.

One soldier shouted:

"It's the enemy!"

Weingartner realized Fort Volks had been infiltrated by the Imperial army.

They came from beneath the ground.

2 hours before the infiltration--

In a plain near the forest. Boulders of various sizes were scattered around his feet. The soil looked dry, hard and uncultivable.

Using one of the boulders as a table, Regis spread out his map.

The work team leader squatted besides him.

"We finally made it, Mr. Strategist."

"So it's done?"

"If we were aiming for the main gate, we would have finished last night..."

"It can't be helped. Just reaching the main gate would increases casualties as we can't achieve a decisive victory... If they found out about the tunnel and attacked it with cannons, the hastily constructed tunnels might collapse..."

"Aye. But the ground is hard around here, so the worry is not the tunnel collapsing, but digging through... Sorry it took 3 days longer than planned."

"There are too many boulders."

They encountered rocks hard enough to deform shovels while digging the tunnel. Small amount of explosives were slotted into the rock crevices to blow it up in such instances.

And they also did piling work to build pillars to strengthen the tunnel.

All these construction works were noisy.

Regis fired the cannons nonstop to use the cannon explosions as cover for the construction works.

On a side note, tools of this era could dig about 40Pa (296 cm) in 30 minutes.

Professionals were hired for the task, and were fostered into shifts, working all hours of the day.

The crates disguised as food were actually tools used for tunnel construction, since they didn't plan for a long campaign from the very beginning.

The excavated soil was hidden in giant tents, and then disposed farther away in the night.

"And finally, we will blast through their floor with dynamites. A pit will be dug right under it so the collapsed earth won't clog up the tunnel."

"According to the blueprints, blasting the floor of the armory would be fine... But their ammunition cache seems to be in a room further down."

"That means the ammunition cache is right next door."

"I don't want to imagine that... But any error in the measurement will make the entire Fort and the 4000 people in there go up in smoke... The work team and breaching team will be caught in the explosion too."

"The empire's measuring skills are the best in the world. Please trust us, Mr. Strategist."

"Yes... I leave it in your hands."

They obtained the same information from the green bronze knights prisoners; the location of the ammunition cache remained the same.

But there were always exceptions.

As the work team leader focused on his task, Regis stared hard at the blue print.

Footsteps walking closer could be heard.

"You will catch a cold again alright?"

"... Ah, Altina."

"The tunnel seems to be almost done."

"Eh!? How did you find out?"

Regis tensed up.

Did he leak the news due to his carelessness?

Altina reached over.

She pinched his cheeks and said:

"Because you are making a scary face."

"Ugh..."

"Don't make an expression as if you are going to die. Aren't things going well?"

"Yesh."

She released Regis' cheeks.

It still stung.

"We will win if we get into their armory?"

"... I think so. A well prepared soldier in full armor on the first day would only carry a sword by the 7th day."

"That's true. It is hard to go about your day in full armor."

"They are probably rather... Sleep deprived..."

"It's the same here. We are only doing better because of our ear plugs."

"Yeah."

Because they would be conducting artillery bombardment through the night, the empire had prepared a set of ear plugs for everyone.

To prevent the sneak attack of the enemy, they had been drilled on how to convey messages to everyone in an emergency.

"If we suppress the armory, the enemy won't have access to their armor and pikes... We can't use our pikes in the mines too, but we have the advantage with our shields and armor. Most importantly, the enemy will definitely be in disarray."

"They won't even know why the imperial army is there."

"Ah... The next step is... dividing into the team holding the enemy back, the team to suppress the main gate and the team to take the cannons."

After wresting away control of the cannons and the main gate, the imperial army could charge right in.

"But they have the advantage in numbers right?"

"That's right, but considering the preparedness and morale, we will manage somehow."

"Are we leaving the enemy general alone?"

"... A fort commander without his troops and cannons wouldn't matter."

"Right."

"If we gain control of the cannons, it will be the empire's victory... right here..."

Regis pointed with his finger and said:

"... If we succeed in our attack, we will raise the flag."

"And we will win?"

"Yes. If the rest of our units move in, it would be over."

"If we can't raise the flag?"

"Then the mission would be a failure... We would retreat... And hope things would be settled with just my court martial..."

"Hmmm... Then I have to join the first wave."

"Huh!?"

"Controlling the cannons is the most important step correct?"

"That's true but..."

"Then I have to go!"

"Don't be silly Altina... You are..."

"What? Are you going to say I am a girl or a child now?"

"Aren't you injured?"

"Hmmp, I can go if I am not injured right?"

"... Ah, that's right. Because of the space constraint in the tunnel, the infiltration team would be limited in numbers. Those who can't take fight can't be in the team... Sir Jerome would take care of the infiltration efforts, Altina, you need to stay here and charge in with the cavalry when the flag rises."

The injuries were just an excuse.

Regis just didn't want her to take the most dangerous role.

It's admirable for the commanders to want to lead from the front, but that would be dependent on the battle plan. The infiltration team would be isolated if the plan fails. They might also get buried alive or blasted to smithereens along with the Fort.

"Yes, I understand."

"I'm glad you are so understanding..."

"I understand there wouldn't be a problem if I didn't get injured!"

Altina used her left hand that should be wounded to grab a rock near her feet.

It was about the size of a human head.

Phew~, she regulated her breathing.

"Haaaahhh~!!

She seemed to be pumping herself up.

The soldiers nearby gathered over to see what was the commotion about.

Regis looked closely.

"Haahhhhhahhh~!!"

Altina yelled loudly.

Some distance away, the cannons of the empire continued firing, emitting a earth shaking explosive sound.

At the same time--

The rock shattered.

The rock in Altina's left hand disintegrated into pieces. This was no longer about injuries, but something shocking that seemed to be beyond the abilities of humans.

"Great!!"

Altina clenched her left fist happily.

The troops that were watching cheered. They probably thought it was some kind of performance.

Regis was speechless.

Altina stared at him gleefully.

"I'm not injured right!?"

"That's too reckless!"

"I am healed."

That's one and a half month earlier than what the lady doctor said!?

"But, but... For the Princess to assume command and to attack through the tunnels..."

"What, so what you said earlier was a lie?"

"Ugh... That's not..."

"Alright then, it's decided! Leaving me out until the battle is over is too mean!"

"... You are the one being mean. My stomach ulcer is killing me."

"Watch your health okay?"

"You should be the one doing that... Well, I will join the infiltration team too."

"Hmmm? Regis is fighting too?"

"Fighting is impossible... I am going on scene to coordinate. It would be easier to deal with things if there are problems and increase the success rate... So I hope Altina can stay by my side."

"Eh!?"

Her face turned red.

"I will come up with the ideas, you will give the command, that's how a commander should be right?"

"That, that's right."

"Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Altina kept nodding her head.

Regis breathed a sigh of relief. It was impossible to exclude her from the infiltration team but...

"Great... Then we will be team 4."

"Huh!?"

"Team 1 will fend off the enemy troops, Team 2 will take the cannons, Team 3 will capture the main gate. Team 4 will provide aid if any of the other teams face any problems. All of them are important, so there shouldn't be anything to be unhappy about right?"

"I want to raise the flag! Team 2 is definitely better!!"

"... Ahhh? You are not keeping your promise? Didn't you say that you will stay by my side?"

"Ugh!?"

Tears welled up in Altina's eyes.

Regis cowered.

She rubbed her eyes and ran as if she was fleeing.

"Waahh! Regis cheated me~~!!"

"Wait...!?"

He couldn't deny that but the stares from his surroundings stung. What if weird rumors start to spread!?

Just as Regis who was left alone and was wondering what to do, the work team leader came over.

"Erm~ Mr. Strategist?"

"Ugh... Are there any problems!?"

"No, just that the pieces of that rock, can you give it to me?"

"Hah? The rock shattered by the princess? Why?"

"To use as an amulet! For such a beautiful princess to crush iron ore with her bare hands is too amazing! It would definitely give blessings in shattering boulders!"

"Ah, huh..."

A strange new religion was created, Regis thought with a headache.

Everyone in the tunnel held their breath.

Altina was pouting in the beginning, her forehead started to sweat and she had a serious expression in the silence before the infiltration.

This trip would be meaningless if I don't join in -- Eric said and took part as well.

The soldiers were lined up in file formation in the tunnel.

The torch held by the leading soldier was the only light source, it was very dark. Everyone held their breath in order to keep the noise to a minimum before the infiltration.

With 30 members in each team -- including the reserves in team 6, there were 180 members in the infiltration group.

The work team leader lit the fuse.

The fire traveled along the fuse.

Towards the ceiling.

The soldiers cupped their ears and opened their mouth, preparing for impact. Regis, Altina and Eric did the same.

There was an explosion and the soil fell at the same time.

A large amount of dirt fell from the ceiling. Regis was worried about the prospect of being buried alive... But fortunately, he was just covered in dust and sand.

The command "Attack!!" was heard from the front.

Altina beside him shouted "Attack~!!" loudly.

The measurements of Belgaria were praiseworthy indeed. They couldn't make the measurement freely in enemy grounds and had to depend on an old blue print, but the breach was still situated right before the armory.

Although the plan was to go straight into the armory.

Team 1 climbed out of the hole.

That was the first instance in history of Belgarian soldiers stepping inside Fort Volks.

Under the cover of black gunpowder smoke and dust, the imperial army formed ranks with short spears.

"Move! Move!"

"What's happening!?"

"Hahhh~~!!"

"Wahhh!?"

The soldier that was pierced in the chest died instantly. He didn't expect it to be an enemy attack and thought it was the tunnel collapsing. He had a shovel instead of a sword in hand.

With his comrade dead, the other soldier screamed:

"It's the enemy!"

That soldier was silenced by the imperial spear too.

Right after team 1 exit, team 2 made their way to the stairs.

Team 3 then headed towards the main gate.

Regis and Altina were in team 4 right after them.

"Hah!"

She took a deep breath after coming out of the hole.

She should be having an easier time than the soldiers in full armor and shields, but because of her giant sword, she had a hard time scaling the rope ladder.

The sword was as long as a short spear, so it could be used in the confined tunnel. That's why Altina bought the giant double edged 'Grand Tonnerre Quatre' with her.

The national treasure of the empire bestowed to her when she was appointed the commander of Fort Century.

One of the 7 swords of the 'Flame Emperor'.

Because she had injuries, the plan was to use it as a symbolic decoration, but...

The morale of the troops went sky high.

Finally, the empty handed Regis scaled the rope ladder the slowest. As he was climbing slowly, Eric who went in before him offered a hand to him.

"I'm pulling!"

"Ah..."

He felt his body floating up.

Regis was lifted up.

"Are you okay, Sir Regis?"

"... Thank... Thank you."

"Please keep your head down."

"Yeah."

"Mu~~~"

Altina pouted.

This was the main passageway of Fort Volks, so it was wide enough for pikes to be used. There were signs of tracks, so carts were probably used here too.

The walls were of stone without windows.

The passageway was illuminated by candles, but most of them were blown out by the wind of the explosion.

The infiltration group knew this and brought torches with them.

Altina leaned over.

"Regis, what should we do?"

"The plan was to support the teams that run into trouble but..."

With a loud bang, someone fell down the stairs.

"Hyaa-!!"

It was a heavy armored imperial soldier! His armor was dented.

And it was not only one man.

One after another, men were falling from the floor above.

‘There seems to be a problem,’ Regis thought as he wiped the dirt from his face.

"Ugh... were the guards defending the cannons stronger than expected?"

Eric said as he drew his sword.

"Sir Regis, Let me support them with team 5!"

"Well..."

The safety of Altina was the top priority, but Eric was a young knight entrusted to him by Evrard. After seeing the dented armor and helmet of the fallen soldiers, Regis hesitated entrusting this to him.

But if it took too long to capture the cannons, the group numbering less than 200 would fall from the attrition of fighting 4000 enemy soldiers.

"Team 4, we are going!"

"What!? Alti... Princess!?"

"We need to reinforce them right!? Help out the team in trouble!"

She charged up the stairs as she spoke.

The soldiers jogged along, shouting "Follow the princess! Follow closely!"

Regis hugged his head.

"I did say that but... Ah, really, that's what I said!"

He charged in too.

Eric moved alongside him.

"You do believe."

"Eh?"

"You do believe that if it was the princess, she wouldn't lose to anyone."

"... I promised to trust her... But..."

But he was still worried.

The enemy was responding faster than he expected.

He could feel the chaos fading away. They might have prepared for such a situation and trained for it.

The soldiers of Fort Volks were not well equipped, but they still begun their counter attack.

There was no time to waste on suppressing the cannons.

When Regis went up the stairs, he saw Altina taking a stance with her sword.

The troops around her also held their spears and swords.

This area was used to put stores when this was still a mine, so it was slightly wider.

"Could it be, that you are the commander?"

Before them was an elderly man in military uniform.

His hair was white, but his eyes were sharp.

"Yes, I am the commander of Fort Volks, Weingartner."

He spoke fluent Belgarian.

"I am Marie Quatre Argentina de Belgaria. Commander of the border regiment."

"I did hear the news... but you are really young, princess of Belgaria."

"Ara, I will be 15 in spring. Won't I be an amazing lady by then?

Weingartner sighed and said:

"Leading an army at such a tender age, and making it all the way here. Infiltrating from underground... Impressive."

"Hmmp, that's right. But it's not my idea though."

"Oh?"

Altina looked at Regis behind her.

Seeing that Regis was unarmed, Weingartner nodded and said:

"A strategist?"

"That's right, my strategist!"

"In the past, digging tunnels were not an uncommon tactic; it is hard to defend even if you knew it was coming... But this tactic was made obsolete as cannons can cause the tunnels to collapse. To think the cannons were meant to cover up the noise of constructing the tunnel..."

"Hmmp."

Altina puffed out her chest.

Her face seemed to have 'my strategist is amazing' written all over it.

Weingartner gritted his teeth in regret.

Regis shied away when he was glared at.

"Erm... Sorry..."

"I will say again that it was impressive, and it was my failure to not detect this. But..."

Weingartner shouted with all his might, his fist also trembled.

"I will not let you pass through here! You can either go back to the hole on your own or as a corpse!"

He raised the iron staff in his hands.

There was no spear tip, it was just an iron staff. But the image of the fallen soldiers showed that it carried enough weight to crush helmets and skulls.

Altina held her sword with both hands.

Regis shook his head and said:

"Princess, please act with care... There is only one man, there are many ways of dealing with him."

"Yes, princess! Let me go in your stead!"

Eric advised her too.

"No! If I avoid this here, no one will follow me in the future. I need to keep showing my might in order to advance my cause!"

Altina moved forward.

The troops all took a couple of steps backwards to avoid getting caught in the fray. They all saw the duel half a month ago.

They weren't here as bystanders this time.

The troops here left everything in Altina's hands, just like they trusted Jerome or Evrard.

It had nothing to do with appearances, age or position.

The troops trusted the strongest person on the battle field.

Regis felt the huge disparity -- Although he was a soldier too, but his way of thinking and values were different from them, so he couldn't look at things in the same way as them.

For Regis, Altina was the 4th princess of the empire and a 14 year old girl. Both her sword and teacher were top class, but she was still a girl.

It couldn't be helped if he worried or felt uneasy.

He couldn't chase the image of the broken helmets on the fallen soldiers out of his head.

"Princess..."

"What? It's too late to stop this now okay?"

"Yes... But please don't force yourself..."

"Yes, I promise you."

Altina concentrated on the foe before her, speaking to Regis with her back towards him.

"I will definitely win! So follow me!"

She kicked the ground as she shouted.

Weingartner waved his iron staff in response.

"I can't lose either! I will not hand the land of Varden Duchy to Belgaria!!"

"I will change the empire! Let me use the fort in order to do that!!"

"Ugh!?"

Altina raised her sword.

It touched the ceiling.

Weingartner smirked:

"That's too careless, princes!"

"What are you saying!"

The sword sliced through the tough boulders and swung forward.

The white haired general stared with his eyes wide open.

"You actually--!?"

"Haahh--!!"

She wasn't stopped by the ceiling, she was using the ceiling as a catch, and releasing all the weight in her strike with one blow.

If Weingartner attacked without hesitation, he might have been faster than her.

But the experienced general was slow to react to unknown situations.

The moment of hesitation gave Altina the time to make the decisive blow.

'Grand Tonnerre Quatre" swung down.

Weingartner blocked with his staff.

It didn't stop the sword.

"Ugu Wahh!?"

The iron staff bent. The sword glanced through Weingartner's chest and struck into the ground.

The old general fell with his back on the floor.

The soldiers pointed their spears at him.

"Don't move!"

"Ugh... Ah... it's regretful... With my failure of losing the critical defensive fort, I cannot face the Duke nor the citizens... Just kill me."

"I am sorry, but it's not over yet! I will make a move first!"

Altina charged ahead.

She climbed to a higher floor.

Regis gave instructions to the soldiers hastily.

"10 men stay behind! 2 of you pass the message 'we have captured the enemy commander' and the rest protect the princess!"

The soldiers acknowledged in unison.

Regis chased after Altina and ran alongside the troops.

Eric moved alongside him.

"That was amazing... the princess... sliced through the ceiling."

"That was reckless."

"And her left hand was still injured."

"No... it is healed. She even crushed a rock."

"Hmm? Her wrist wasn't hurt, so she can still do that much... But no matter how strong her grip is, her upper arm would still hurt from the burden right? Her fracture might be fine now though."

"... What... did you say?"

"Didn't you notice? She was fighting with just her right hand. Her left hand was just supporting."

"Just her right hand!?"

"Sir Regis, you did mention that you wouldn't understand sword techniques even if you saw them."

"She, she lied to me~!?

"That... seems troubling..."

Eric laughed dryly.

I would never have let her take part if I knew! Regis thought angrily.

After climbing up several flights of steps and Eric pulling him by the hand near the end, Regis finally made it to the cannons.

Altina and the troops had completed the capture.

The artillery soldiers made no attempt to resist, raising their hands in surrender at a corner.

Before them was a man in the uniform of general similar to what Weingartner was wearing.

"I, I am the chief of staff... I sincerely hope you will treat us properly as prisoners of war. Torture and unnecessary killing goes against the 8th rule of engagement..."

"Take care of this, Regis!"

The brutish Altina was not good with these sort of things.

Regis was panting hard as he walked towards them.

"Hah... hah... hah... hah..."

"..."

"Hah... hah... We won't kill you."

"Thank, thank you."

Or rather, Regis was the one who was on the verge of death.

Altina giggled:

"Is that enough? You won't recite stuff?"

"Hah... hah... I... will die..."

"Don't just read books, exercise more."

"... I will consider that."

It was really hard to follow this princess.

Especially for an inept person like him.

Because the cannons were linked to the outside, they were able to breathe the air outside.

The cold air that should only be chilling felt comfortable for some reason. Regis pulled the collar of his uniform to dry his sweat.

It was a really short moment, but the soldiers closed their eyes as they basked in the sun and wind.

Altina took out the flag that was prepared beforehand.

Eric handed a spear to her.

"Please use this, princess."

"Thank you."

"It's taken from the enemy though."

"Fufu... This really feels like a battle field right?"

Altina tied the flag to the spear and leaned outside.

Regis started to worry.

"The wind is strong so..."

"Ahaha, it's fine!"

"But if you fall..."

"It's fine! You worry too much!"

Altina waved the flag.

The flag that depicted the shield of the citizens.

I hope that this battle will be the first step, Regis thought.

Altina shouted out loud.

"Everyone~!! We captured it~!"

With black knight Jerome taking the lead, the black knights charged over.

The main gate opened at this moment.

Team 3 was doing well.

The invincible history of Fort Volks from Varden Duchy was ended.

Chapter 5: An Invitation into Darkness

After taking down Fort Volks, Regis returned to Fort Sierck.

Altina, Eric and Jerome stayed behind.

With 4000 Germania war prisoners, there was a high risk of losing the fort if they slipped up.

Jerome could only be left behind in situations where he couldn't exercise his ambition.

Regis rode the carriage alone.

He did mingle with the soldiers traveling with him, but he wasn't with his usual group now. It was a fresh experience journeying with the thousand soldiers transporting goods, but he couldn't calm down.

After entering the dark forest--

The middle aged knight approached the carriage with an uneasy expression.

"Sir strategist, will it be okay...?"

"What's the matter?"

This is the forest belonging to the barbarians who attacked us some time ago. It would be better to hurry the men."

"Ah, about that..."

Regis remembered Diethart.

He took on a massive amount of jobs during the preparation phase of this battle.

"... Don't worry. We need to be alert, but there won't be a large scale attack by the savages."

"Hmmm, I knew it... The rumor was true."

"Ah... You already knew?"

Regis thought the news of the secret alliance had leaked--

But that wasn't so.

The middle aged knight said with a serious face:

"Because the princess is a goddess, so even savages that were no different than wild beasts yielded to her."

"Eh? Ah, not... Goddess or something..."

"Fufufu, I understand. There was no other way for that Jerome to lose his duel. She really is a goddess!"

"Ha, haha..."

This man was knight commander Evrard's subordinate-- Regis accepted bewilderedly.

He continued while puffing out his chest:

"We have the blessing of the goddess! Let's return to the fortress the next morning as planned. Please travel on the carriage with ease, sir strategist!"

"Alright... Well then... I will be in your care."

The group returned without any trouble.

The weather was great. If this was the blessing of the goddess, Regis had no qualms expressing his gratitude.

Fort Sierck was in a festive mood after receiving the news of victory.

When Regis's group arrived in the afternoon, the wide open gates were filled with cheering soldiers, they even threw flower petals from atop the walls.

They entered the parade square.

The citizens of Tuonvell were present too, serving beer and meat in celebration.

Evrard came to receive them.

"Oh! Sir Regis!"

"Ah, thank you for holding the fort."

"You really did it! As expected of the strategist! You are a true hero!!"

"Eh!? Please, please hold on... I didn't do any..."

"Raise your head. Those accomplishing what others couldn't do are called heroes on the battle field!"

"Hah..."

They will force the title on him even if he resisted, so Regis nodded hesitantly.

He wanted to curl his body up.

The heroes appearing in the stories Regis read were cool, popular with the ladies and had lofty goals.

Altina should be closer to that.

She should be the heroine.

"You understand, Sir Regis! This exhilaration! Everyone was in utter despair, but thanks to you, we can share the joy of living on with each other. Isn't this an achievement worthy of praise?"

"I am really happy... But really... I just happened to know... And I was lucky. The one executing it were the professionals and troops."

"Haha, you are really timid!"

Smack! Evrard patted him on the back.

Regis wasn't good with accepting compliments.

He saw through me-- Regis thought with an awkward smile.

"Ora, everybody, the main character for the day is sir strategist here! Hurry, say something!"

"Eh!?"

Because of Evrard's roar, the troops celebrating in the vicinity focused their attention on him.

Regis was at a loss.

"Ah-- ... Umm... Thank you everyone for your support... This victory... Was thanks to the effort of everyone present. Umm... Ah, that's right... Now is a good chance, so I will break the news. Eh--... Beilschmidt border regiment will shift its base to Fort Volks."

The troops turned silent instantly.

That famous Fort Volks said to be invulnerable will be their new base!?

Cheers erupted everywhere.

Evrard laughed heartily.

"Wa--hahaha! What a joy! Guhaha... Cough, cough!"

He choked.

The troops and the citizens attending the festival were celebrating joyously.

When he realized it, Regis was surrounded by merchants.

"Sir strategist, sir strategist, please award us with the contract to restore Fort Volks!"

"I brought 10 barrels of beer to celebrate today. By the way, do come to our workshop if you require more weapons."

"How about using this chance to buy new furniture?"

"... Hah... That is not something I can decide on my own."

"Please help to recommend this to the princess in my stead!"

"... Well... She did say she would leave this to me."

"If you have anything you need, please give us the business!"

"I know, I know. I will look into it so..."

"This way please, sir strategist! Forget about business for now, let's have a drink! By the way, this child is my daughter, she is about marriageable age."

"Oh, sir strategist is still single!? Pleased take a look at my daughter!"

"... No no no, women have the right to choose too. I am not someone who can marry so easily."

They were all using this chance to market their service.

The strategist Regis Auric was unexpectedly highly regarded.

On top of that, shifting to Fort Volks meant reinforcing troops and maintenance of the new base.

If they secured a major contract with the regiment, they could reap a large profit.

No wonder the merchants were showing their business smiles.

"Ah~... Erm... I still have preparation work for the relocation to handle!"

Regis ran from the parade square as if he was fleeing.

He returned to his own room.

The entrance was guarded by soldiers, so the merchants couldn't follow him into the central tower.

A different kind of fatigue that was different from the battlefield compelled him to collapse onto his bed.

"Phew~..."

Shortly after! the door was knocked.

Regis was surprised.

"... Who is it?"

"Mr. Regis, it's me, Elin."

"Ah."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

Margrave Jerome's maid, Elin, came over to help from time to time. She was slightly older than Regis.

After opening the door, a lively brown skinned girl entered.

She hugged him with a "Wah."

"Mr. Regis!"

"Wooahh!?"

"Congratulations! You were amazing!"

Moist eyes.

Blushing cheeks.

And a soft sensation, Regis felt he was turning strange in a variety of ways.

"Er, erm... Ms Elin...?"

“I thought it would be hopeless. To attack that notorious fort."

"Yeah. I thought so too..."

"And all of a sudden, I heard news of Mr. Regis' victory!"

"Hahaha... Well, the victor is the princess."

"I was... Really worried, I wanted to meet you."

"Thank, thank you."

Regis was hugged and stumbled backwards as he was being pushed. He tripped over a pile of documents and fell.

"Ah!?"

"Mr. Regis~~"

This is bad... If I don't clean that up.

Now is not the time to think about that!

When Regis focused on the present again, Elin was riding on top of him.

"Ah, eh?"

"Erm... I..."

"Yes."

Elin looked into Regis' eyes passionately.

He could feel her warm breathing.

Regis' mind was blank and his body stiff.

He couldn't comprehend what was going on.

"-- welcome back, Mr. Regis."

A voice came from the door.

But the tone was ice cold.

And sounded familiar.

Regis finally regained his senses.

"Ah, Ms. Clarisse!"

"How unexpected... You actually remembered my name."

"Why!? Of course. Remember..."

Regis looked at her and found her ice cold smile chilling.

It made him shiver.

His current position was stuck close to another women, a bad position to be in.

Regis said in a panic:

"Ah, no, this, erm, Ms Elin came over to congratulate me and..."

"I see. If you plan to continue, I will just leave alright?"

"Con, continue what!?"

Regis struggled to get up.

Elin backed away with a regretful face.

"Mu~~~"

"... Phew."

Clarisse entered the room and arranged the scattered documents.

"This is the regiment's fort, not the Margrave's mansion. If you want to play, can you please do so in the parade square?"

A needle like gaze pierced Elin.

Elin backed away.

"I... I am... Serious about this!"

"I see. And so? You think I am not serious?"

"Ugh!?"

"Fufu... There won't be a conclusion to this debate. Mr. Regis doesn't have such thoughts. It's a pity."

"How could it be! Men only think about that, be it day or night!"

The 2 women looked at Regis.

Elin's gaze was full of passion while Clarisse's eyes were ice cold.

Maybe it's because of how Regis was brought up by his sister, but Regis was like a little brother who couldn't stand up before elderly women. He felt that he couldn't handle either lady.

Regis backed away once more.

He felt as if he had entered the cage of a grey wolf.

"... Erm... What do you mean by those thoughts?"

The 2 women sighed in response.

"Mr. Regis is really..."

"It’s Mr. Regis after all."

"What did I do?"

"It's what you didn't do, Mr. Regis!"

"Ms Elin, please restrain yourself... If you go overboard, I will call the guards okay?"

"Ugh~~~"

At this moment, Elin's brother Gösta showed up.

He was an apprentice butler in the Margrave's mansion.

"Ah, found you. Sis, I just received master Jerome's letter, let's hurry back to the mansion and report to Mr. McClane... Ugh!?"

The innocent youth turned pale with just a fierce glare from his sister.

"I will return this time! Farewell Mr. Regis. Let's continue next time!"

"Yeah, hmm...?"

Clarisse turned her back to the siblings.

"Mr. Regis, remember to get some holy water to expel evil from the priest later."

"Huh, why?"

After the door was closed and the siblings were gone, Clarisse's anger finally eased.

She approached Regis with a smile and reached both her hands out.

And pinched Regis' cheeks.

"Eh?"

He was too naive to think Clarisse's anger had eased. Although Regis didn’t understand why she was angry.

"Welcome back, Mr. Regis."

"Fumo... I'm phat.."

"Because you promised... So I believed you will be back. It's great that you are not wounded."

"Mmh."

Regis' response was weird because his face was being pulled.

The fingers pinching his cheeks let go, and started to caress his face.

Clarisse put both her hands on Regis' face.

And she drew her lips closer like this.

-- Eh? What is happening? Regis was petrified once again.

She smelled really good.

It numbed the depths of his brain.

When she was close enough for Regis to feel her breath.

"Mr. Regis..."

"Erm... Ms Clarisse?"

"That's forbidden. Before a woman like me... Being so defenseless..."

"What is happening here?"

"You want me to explain it here? How cruel of you Mr. Regis. I thought you were more gentle."

"... I am... Not very gentle. Others might get such an impression because of my lack of courage."

"Are you changing the topic?"

"Is, is that so; I didn't mean to do that."

"Fufufu... Can I report this to the princess?"

"Wha!?"

Regis shrunk with the mention of Altina.

Clarisse released her hands.

Before he realized it, Regis had backed away for unknown reasons.

Clarisse smiled happily.

"I was joking, Mr. Regis... Would you like some tea?"

"... Thank you, I won't hold back then. I am feeling really thirsty for some reason."

"Alright, immediately."

Clarisse left the room with a bow.

Two weeks after the Beilschmidt border regiment took down fort Volks.

Regis' group were inside the conference room used by Weingartner and his staff in the past.

The empire's flag and the flag designed by Altina were draped on the wall.

Because she lacked artistic talent, the drawing of the shield was redrawn by a professional.

A corner of the room was decorated with red flowers, prepared by Clarisse who moved here from century fort.

"I thought it would be needed soon, so I brought it in advance."

That's how she was.

As usual, the one who had the utmost faith in the princess' victory was definitely her.

Apart from Regis, Altina, Evrard and Jerome were present too.

Only the minimum of forces were left in Sierck fort; the rest have shifted to fort Volks.

It would be their base from now on.

Regis said with a report in hand:

"-- And in conclusion, the relocation has been completed. It will feel uncomfortable before getting used to it. Renovations will be done, so let me know if you have any suggestions."

Altina lifted her hand and said:

"The chefs are sighing, saying they couldn't make anything but sausage."

"Haha... I will get an architect for the kitchen. There will be a new stove by next month."

Jerome browsed the documents in his hands.

"What about the mercenaries? You did talk to the guys from Fort Volks right?"

"About a thousand will end their contract with Varden Duchy and sign up with Beilschmidt border regiment instead. But they are still prisoners of war right now."

"That's too little. 3000 of the 4000 troops stationed here should be mercenaries. There should be some Varden soldiers who want to defect too. Shouldn't there be 1500 more?"

"Our budget is tight, so I made the criteria more stringent. Such as age and battle experience."

"Hmmp! You are as dull as usual. It doesn't matter, take in we everyone who is willing."

"But..."

"They would be combat worthy after training under me for 3 months!"

"I, I get it."

"You are ignorant of things that have to do with sweating. Even though you are so well verse with bloodshed."

"Please don't make it sound as if I have a weird fetish... Compared to effort driven stories, tales about intellect are more popular these days. Ah, speaking of genius and bloodshed... I read a book not long ago... It was about an exceptional girl solving mysteries while eating snacks. That was great! Just staying in her tower and--"

"Enough, next report!!"

"Ah, yes..."

When Regis chatted about books, he couldn’t stop himself.

"Erm, the return request from Varden Duchy... Do you want to hear the amount they are offering?"

"No need for that."

"... That's true."

Altina nodded.

"Be it the lives that were lost in taking the fort, or the lives that were saved with the conquest of this stronghold, these can’t be bought with money."

"If we need money, just capture the capital of those bastards. I will burn them down when I have the time-- just tell them that."

"Wait, Sir Jerome? I was just talking about how precious lives are!"

"We would probably make war with them anyway."

"Ah~... I get it! I will reply to Varden Duchy. It would be fine if there won't be any war immediately."

Evrard seemed to be in a great mood and said:

"Speaking of which, the troops seemed to be addressing the regiment by another name."

"Hmmp..."

Jerome shifted his gaze.

He seemed to know about it.

Altina tilted her head.

"And what's that?"

"Marie Quatre army-- that's what they call it."

"Eh!? Me!?"

"This means the soldiers adore the princess."

"Ugh, erm... Is that so?"

"That's how it is! A goddess!"

Altina shrunk with embarrassment.

Regis empathized with her.

Although the territory of Beilschmidt wouldn't disappear, the scale was beyond regiment level. Calling it the Marie Quatre army was more appropriate.

"Isn't that great?"

The door was knocked at this moment.

Because these were passages dug through boulders, the sound of knocking was louder than Fort Sierck

"... Enter?"

"Pardon me."

It was Eric.

He took out a letter.

"This just came from the capital."

These words made Altina and Jerome tense up.

They were ordered to attack Fort Volks because of their alliance with the barbarians.

Because the border regiment became strong, the order was passed down to weaken them. But Altina managed to take down the renowned invincible fort and increase her forces by more than a thousand.

How would the 2nd prince Latreille react?

Regis took the letter.

"This is addressed to the princess... Is it okay for me to open it?"

"Of course, this concerns all of us."

"Well then..."

The letter was laid out on the table.

It was another long winded letter congratulating the victory.

At the very end--

"We will be hosting the founding day festival in April. Marie Quatre Argentina is cordially invited to attend. This is what father wished for as well. I looked forward to the day our family will be gathered once more."

Jerome slammed his hand on the table.

"It's a trap!"

"Indeed. But we can't ignore it too."

Evrard frowned.

Eric looked gloomy too.

"That's right... It said that it was the wishes of the princess' father... the emperor."

"Again! Turn it down and be branded as traitors!?"

Regis tilted his head slightly and said:

"It shouldn't... be that extreme. But it can't be helped if they accuse us of being disloyal. Taking Fort Volks and increasing the princess’ forces is already a widespread topic."

"With this fort, we can stand up to the guys of the first army!"

Jerome stood up.

From the current circumstances, there might be problems with supplies, but it was definitely better than before.

Altina asked Regis:

"What do you think?"

"Hmm... How about meeting them? They are your family after all."

"They are family. But they might want to kill me though."

"Just try to ascertain this fact. If you want to move forward with your ambition, you will need to face them one day."

"Face them..."

"Yes. The main character of stories will always meet a rival. It's so common that they might as well be friends."

"Books again? Can they be trusted?"

"... Probably. Are you afraid?"

"I don't know."

It wasn't often that Altina showed her weak side.

The name of her brother made her caught her off guard emotionally.

This was an unstable factor which Regis wants to get rid of.

"... This is an invitation made in the name of prince Latreille. Anything that happens in the empire or on the way there would be his responsibility. But that doesn't guarantee that everything would be safe."

"Right... running away is not an option."

"Yes."

Altina stood up.

"I am going to the imperial capital. Even if darkness awaits me there!"

Jerome said with his war face:

"Imperial capital! How about bringing all 5000 troops along for the victory celebration? Well?"

That meant an all out war... Regis frowned.

Altina shook her head and said:

"I just need Regis to come along with me."

"Eh!? Just me!?"

"Ah, Clarisse will be coming too."

"Just 3 people?"

"Tch."

Jerome sat down with a bored expression.

Evrard and Eric pleaded Altina, “At least bring along a guard!”

Regis wanted an escort too.

Because the enemy wasn't just prince Latreille.

Anyway, it had been quite a while since he left the capital.

アルティーナ 第2巻
発売おめでとうございます
&お買上げありがとうございます!
今回はこっそり
アルティーナの衣装が
変わる回でした。
他にもいろいろな
服をぜひ着せて
みたいです。
むらさきさん。
いつも自分も読者気分で
楽しませていただいています。
先に原稿が読めるのが
とても幸せです。
3巻が今から待ちどおしい
です。
担当の和田さん。
いつもギリギリまで ハラハラ
つきあっていただいて
ありがとうございます。
お電話くださる度
やる気いただいてます。
お二方 大変おつかれ
さまでした。